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"THE CHOICE IS BETWEEN FREEDOM AND FEAR"



A REPORT FROM THE FRONT

BY ANNE APPLEBAUM AND JEFFREY GOLDBERG

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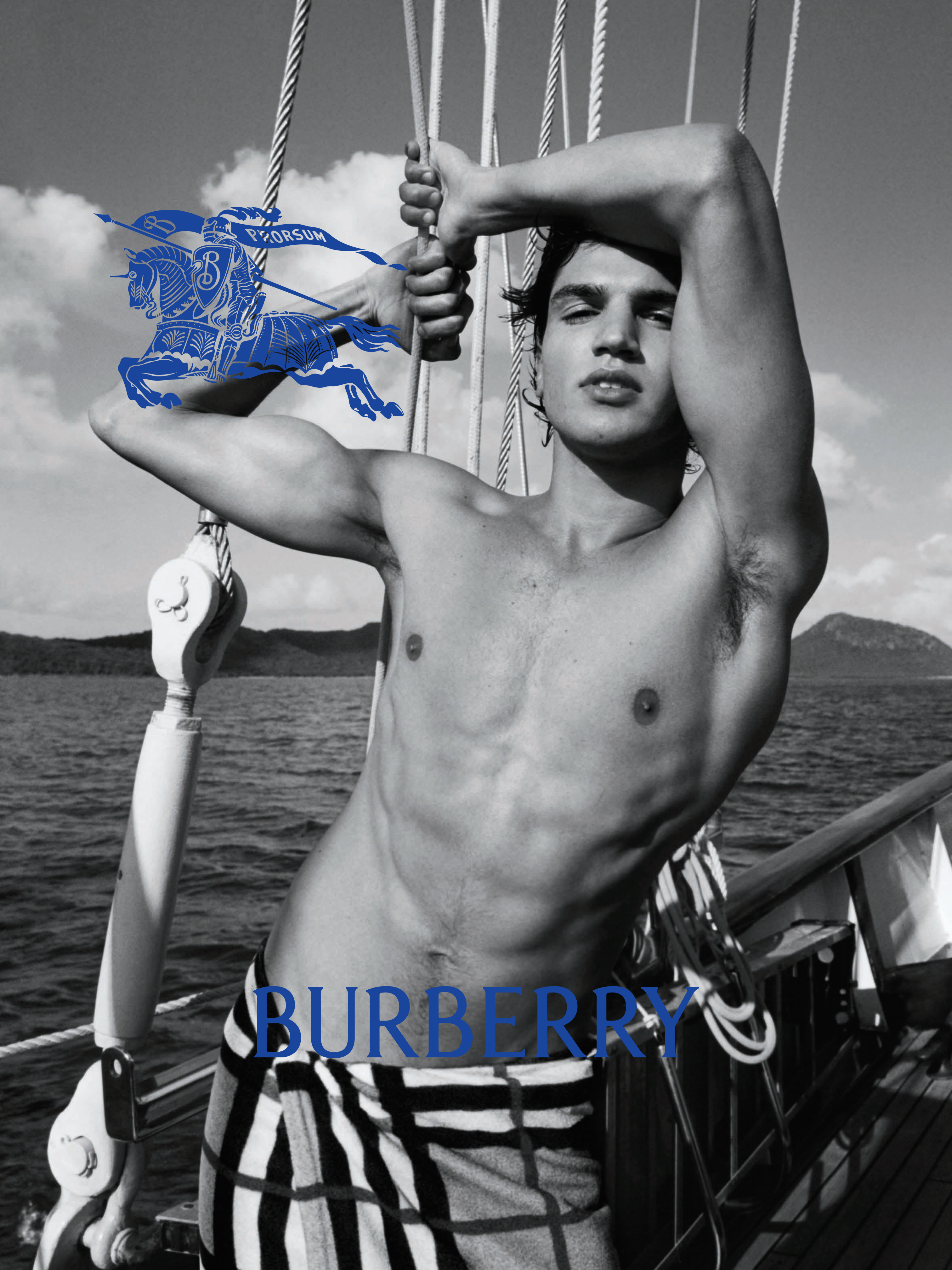
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CONTENTS



Features

56

NIGHT AT THE VATICAN

By Cullen Murphy

After the tourists go home, a museum's collection tells its own story.

16

COVER STORY

The Counteroffensive

By Anne Applebaum and Jeffrey Goldberg

The future of the democratic world will be determined by whether the Ukrainian military can break a stalemate with Russia and drive the country backwards—perhaps even out of Crimea for good.

32

Burned

By Ariel Sabar

How a small-town auto mechanic peddling a solar-energy breakthrough swindled Wall Street investors, Warren Buffett, and the U.S. Treasury out of $1 billion

46

The Making of Tom Hanks

By Chris Heath

The actor—and now novelist—reflects on how he got here, and the other lives he might have lived instead.

The Sistine Chapel being cleaned before opening

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEX MAJOLI / MAGNUM / VATICAN FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

JUNE 2023

Front

6
Editor's Note

8
The Commons
Discussion & Debate

Dispatches

11
OPENING ARGUMENT
Never Give Artificial Intelligence the Nuclear Codes
The temptation to automate command and control will be great. The danger is greater.
By Ross Andersen

Culture & Critics

70
OMNIVORE
Call of the Wild
The enduring appeal of watching human beings attempt to master the Alaskan backcountry
By James Parker

72
BOOKS
Who Was Cleopatra's Daughter?
The perils of searching for feminist heroes in antiquity
By Mary Beard

75
Disaster
A poem by Tsitsi Jaji

76
BOOKS
Surrender to Steely Dan
How the insufferably perfectionist duo captured the hearts of a new generation of listeners
By Jack Hamilton

80
BOOKS
Writing in the Ruins
The German novelist Jenny Erpenbeck cuts through dogma, fractures time, and preserves rubble.
By Gal Beckerman

Back

84
ESSAY
The Canadian Way of Death
The nation legalized assisted suicide—and exposed the limits of liberalism.
By David Brooks

96
Ode to Writing Odes
By James Parker

On the Cover

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WAR AND CONSEQUENCES

In her book *Gulag: A History*, Anne Applebaum writes, "The more we are able to understand how different societies have transformed their neighbors and fellow citizens from people into objects, the more we know of the specific circumstances which led to each episode of mass torture and mass murder, the better we will understand the darker side of our own human nature."

Anne, who received the Pulitzer Prize for *Gulag*, has made one of her professional preoccupations (to borrow from Robert Burns) man's inhumanity to man—specifically, though not exclusively, the inhumanity manifest in Soviet and post-Soviet history. Her book *Red Famine* is the definitive study of Stalin's calculated starvation of Ukraine. Anne's work on that catastrophe prepared her to write about Ukraine's latest calamity, a calamity whose author is Stalin's worthy successor. Readers of *The Atlantic* have benefited from Anne's erudition, vision, and trenchant writing.

On our most recent visit to Ukraine, the darker side of human nature was plainly visible. One day, in Kherson, the still mostly abandoned southern city only recently liberated by the Ukrainian army, a Russian missile struck a supermarket parking lot. Anne and I were nearby, interviewing Ukrainian soldiers. The missile was meant to murder and terrorize; mission accomplished. Three people died in this attack, and three more were injured, including an elderly woman. A few hours after the strike, all that was left was a modest crater, bits of shrapnel, and smudges of blood on the asphalt. This sort of scene is repeated up and down the Dnipro River: the Russians on one bank, firing artillery and short-range missiles at civilians; the Ukrainians firing back with whatever they have, which is often not enough.

Anne and I first met Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky last year, a short time after Russia's full-scale invasion began, and in that meeting one of the main subjects was, indeed, ordnance—how many rockets and artillery shells Ukraine needed simply to survive the Russian onslaught. When we saw Zelensky again, this past March, the conversation was more expansive, about democracy, education, technology. In this interview (which we conducted with Laurene Powell Jobs, the chair of *The Atlantic*'s board of directors), Zelensky spoke with urgency about the need for the West to remain unfaltering in the face of Russian aggression. This is the subject of the story Anne and I wrote for this issue.



Anne Applebaum, Laurene Powell Jobs, and Jeffrey Goldberg interview President Volodymyr Zelensky at the presidential palace in Kyiv in March 2023.

The war in Ukraine is about much more than Ukraine; it is about the very subjects that animate this magazine: democracy, freedom, justice, humanism. So Anne, and others, will continue to cover this war and its consequences vigorously and ambitiously. As you will see, the pictures accompanying our story were taken by Paolo Pellegrin, one of the greatest living photographers, and the cover was designed and drawn by Bono, who, in addition to … being Bono, is a gifted illustrator. Not long ago, he told me that he sometimes redesigned and reimagined *Atlantic* covers on his iPad. I was, as you might imagine, curious about this hobby, and I asked to see his sketches. They were very good. I suggested that he make an actual *Atlantic* cover. Zelensky, a man we both admire, was a natural subject for his first go. Like Anne, Bono is preoccupied with issues of freedom and dignity, and, working with Oliver Munday, our associate creative director, he made a stunning cover that captures the resolve of Ukraine's wartime president.

IN OTHER NEWS, *The Atlantic* has won the most prestigious honor awarded by the American Society of Magazine Editors, the National Magazine Award for General Excellence. Our magazine won this prize last year as well. We have a staff, and a mission, without parallel in American journalism, and it is gratifying to receive this recognition. This is a tribute to our entire team, and in particular to people like Anne Applebaum, and to the five staff writers who were finalists this year for their outstanding feature stories: Caitlin Dickerson, George Packer, Jennifer Senior, Clint Smith, and Graeme Wood. We are trying to build at *The Atlantic* the world's greatest writers' collective, in order to serve our readers as best we can. I thank all of you for your support and loyalty.

—Jeffrey Goldberg

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEXANDER CHEKMENEV FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

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Behind the Cover: In this month's cover story, "The Counteroffensive" (p. 16), Anne Applebaum and Jeffrey Goldberg report on the stakes of Ukraine's battle to expel Russia from its territory. Visiting the front lines and discussing the war's endgame with President Volodymyr Zelensky, they consider what a Ukrainian victory might mean for democracies around the world. Our cover features original art and hand lettering by the musician Bono.

— Oliver Munday, *Associate Creative Director*

THE

The New Anarchy

America faces a type of extremist violence it does not know how to stop, Adrienne LaFrance wrote in the April 2023 issue.

Letters

Adrienne LaFrance acknowledges that political violence can have a legitimate place in a democratic society, noting that "America was born in revolution." But if King George's excessive taxes in the 1760s and '70s presented a just cause for rebellion against the state, why wouldn't the more than 1,000 extrajudicial killings of American citizens by police in 2022? If we are to treat political violence as the serious problem that it is, we'll need to know when, if ever, it is legitimate.

Keaton Powers
Laredo, Texas

LaFrance is correct to identify universal access to guns, a fragmented media environment, and the refusal of extreme MAGA Republicans to accept defeat in elections as new challenges to America's social fabric. But these factors exist in the wider context of a shift in the racial and ethnic composition of the United States—and thus a shift in the country's power relations. The best point of reference for understanding the rise of violence in the U.S. today is not the anarchist movement or Italy's Years of Lead, but rather the much deeper crisis of the Civil War and Reconstruction. In this historic transformation, the balance of power between races shifted, and the country witnessed violence far worse than what we face today.

The current wave of Trumpist reaction is rooted, I think, in an inchoate fear of a demographic shift that will make white people a minority. The Trump movement is a defensive last gasp of a dying culture of white supremacy.

Mark Robert Schneider
Weymouth, Mass.

The dark shadow of Trumpism and its violence casts a pall over LaFrance's article. Yet LaFrance deliberately chooses not to frame her discussion around the specific threat posed by right-wing extremist groups or MAGA Republicans and their attacks on democracy. Although she is right to identify a "dynamic of action and reaction" between right-wing and left-wing extremists, her both-sides-ism goes too far.

LaFrance concludes that ending political violence will require "facing down those who use the language of democracy to weaken democratic systems." It is obvious that in American politics today, there is only one movement and one party that these words describe: MAGA Republicanism. The clear implication of "The New Anarchy" is that ending political violence now means decisively defeating the Republican Party. I wish LaFrance had forthrightly said this.

Jeffrey C. Isaac
Bloomington, Ind.

ADRIENNE LaFRANCE REPLIES:

Thank you to everyone who read my story. I chose the periods of violence I examined not because they offer simple solutions for exiting these dangerous times—if only!—but because they carry serious warnings that I believe Americans must heed. It would be too facile to say that perpetrators of violence should be held accountable—of course that is the case. But history demon-

strates again and again that in periods of political violence, government overreach poses a grave danger. The unconstitutional Palmer Raids may have quashed anarchist violence in the 1920s, for instance, but at a cost that is far too steep ever to be repeated. I am deeply worried about what will happen to Americans' civil liberties if political violence continues to worsen.

As I wrote, there is no question that Trumpism is a cauldron for right-wing extremism, which is the primary driver of political violence in America today. More alarming still is the GOP's continued obsequiousness to Donald Trump—in essence, political violence is now explicitly endorsed by the state. But it is not enough to simply point at this threat, say who is responsible, and expect that doing so will make it go away. This is why I focused on how right-wing extremists have succeeded in provoking violent reactions from their political foes. This is an extraordinarily dangerous dynamic that fuels propaganda and disinformation, masks who is primarily responsible, exacerbates state violence, and accelerates decivilization and democratic backsliding. Finally, Mark Robert Schneider is absolutely right to point out the underlying racism that animates so many right-wing extremists. This is why I mentioned the post-Reconstruction campaign perversely known as Redemption and called it an urgent warning: Sometimes political violence ends not because it has been defeated, but because it has achieved its aims.

The Moral Case Against Euphemism

Banning words won't make the world more just, George Packer argued in the April 2023 issue.

I think George Packer overestimates the influence of institutional language, which is meant to be as broad, inoffensive, and inclusive as possible in order to appeal to wide and varied audiences—and, by extension, draw in more donors, shareholders, and investors. No one is insisting that you stop calling yourself a "pregnant woman" if you feel that applies to you—colloquial, everyday language will always be different from professional or institutional language.

There are, however, ongoing, state-backed attempts to censor words and even entire academic disciplines—but Packer neglects those. Compared with the horrifying power of censorship at the legislative level, Packer's complaints about institutional style guides fall flat.

Christina Tavella
Boston, Mass.

As a civil-rights attorney, I take issue with the kind of performative progressivism at the heart of the equity-language conversation. Equity language often works as a way for progressives to placate their discomfort with their own privilege while not doing anything substantive about it.

But cultural shifts in language aren't always insidious or performative, and sometimes they can be legitimately beneficial. Packer's passing mention of gender-inclusive language fails to note that it is both fairly easy to implement and exceedingly meaningful for trans and gender-nonconforming people. I am a cisgender female, but I present more androgynously. When I see pronouns included in people's email signatures or gender-neutral language (*they* as opposed to *he*/*she*) used in official documents, I feel that I can express myself honestly in my workplace. I'm more engaged, more outgoing, and more passionate when I can be myself. These subtle shifts in language are deeply meaningful to me.

Mackenzie Karbon
Washington, D.C.

GEORGE PACKER REPLIES:

It's true that institutional equity-language guides are written for narrow audiences, but they aren't hermetically sealed from the larger culture. They all rely, as I described, on the recommendations of "experts" whose influence extends deep into the mainstream, including media organizations. Their usage spreads because no well-intentioned person wants to be caught on the wrong side of a banned word. Otherwise, unnatural terms like Latinx *and* justice-involved person *would remain the private language of a small priesthood.*

The language of gender would have needed an entire article of its own, with a different analysis. Stating pronouns can indeed be more inclusive—except when it's required, which becomes a new form of exclusion of those who don't accept the current ideology of gender. I didn't write about state legislative bans on books and ideas, because that's also another subject—one that has been much, and deservedly, criticized in The Atlantic *and elsewhere. I did conclude my story with a reference to right-wing language orthodoxy, and I hope to expand on it in another story. My purpose in this one was to point out how the spread of a quasi-official, imprecise, euphemistic, jargon-ridden, ever-changing vocabulary in the name of social justice actually makes it harder to see and remedy injustice. Anyone who cares about justice shouldn't be too quick to change the subject.*

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DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

NEVER GIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE THE NUCLEAR CODES

The temptation to automate command and control will be great. The danger is greater.

BY ROSS ANDERSEN

No technology since the atomic bomb has inspired the apocalyptic imagination like artificial intelligence. Ever since ChatGPT began exhibiting glints of logical reasoning in November, the internet has been awash in doomsday scenarios. Many are self-consciously fanciful—they're meant to jar us into envisioning how badly things could go wrong if an emerging intelligence comes to understand the world, and its own goals, even a little differently from how its human creators do. One scenario, however, requires

less imagination, because the first steps toward it are arguably already being taken—the gradual integration of AI into the most destructive technologies we possess today.

The world's major military powers have begun a race to wire AI into warfare. For the moment, that mostly means giving algorithms control over individual weapons or drone swarms. No one is inviting AI to formulate grand strategy, or join a meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. But the same seductive logic that accelerated the nuclear arms race could, over a period of years, propel AI up the chain of command. How fast depends, in part, on how fast the technology advances, and it appears to be advancing quickly. How far depends on our foresight as humans, and on our ability to act with collective restraint.

Jacquelyn Schneider, the director of the Wargaming and Crisis Simulation Initiative at Stanford's Hoover Institution, recently told me about a game she devised in 2018. It models a fast-unfolding nuclear conflict and has been played 115 times by the kinds of people whose responses are of supreme interest: former heads of state, foreign ministers, senior NATO officers. Because nuclear brinkmanship has thankfully been historically rare, Schneider's game gives us one of the clearest glimpses into the decisions that people might make in situations with the highest imaginable human stakes.

It goes something like this: The U.S. president and his Cabinet have just been hustled into the basement of the West Wing to receive a dire briefing. A territorial conflict has turned hot, and the enemy is mulling a nuclear first strike against the United States. The atmosphere in the Situation Room is charged. The hawks advise immediate preparations for a retaliatory strike, but the Cabinet soon learns of a disturbing wrinkle. The enemy has developed a new cyberweapon, and fresh intelligence suggests that it can penetrate the communication system that connects the president to his nuclear forces. Any launch commands that he sends may not reach the officers responsible for carrying them out.

There are no good options in this scenario. Some players delegate launch authority to officers at missile sites, who must make their own judgments about whether a nuclear counterstrike is warranted—a scary proposition. But Schneider told me she was most unsettled by a different strategy, pursued with surprising regularity. In many games, she said, players who feared a total breakdown of command and control wanted to automate their nuclear launch capability completely. They advocated the empowerment of algorithms to determine when a nuclear counterstrike was appropriate. AI alone would decide whether to enter into a nuclear exchange.

Schneider's game is, by design, short and stressful. Players' automation directives were not typically spelled out with an engineer's precision—how exactly would this be done? Could any automated system even be put in place before the culmination of the crisis?—but the impulse is telling nonetheless. "There is a wishful thinking about this technology," Schneider said, "and my concern is that there will be this desire to use AI to decrease uncertainty by [leaders] who don't understand the uncertainty of the algorithms themselves."

AI offers an illusion of cool exactitude, especially in comparison to error-prone, potentially unstable humans. But today's most advanced AIs are black boxes; we don't entirely understand how they work. In complex, high-stakes adversarial situations, AI's notions about what constitutes winning may be impenetrable, if not altogether alien. At the deepest, most important level, an AI may not understand what Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev meant when they said, "A nuclear war cannot be won."

> THE SAME SEDUCTIVE LOGIC THAT ACCELERATED THE NUCLEAR ARMS RACE COULD, OVER A PERIOD OF YEARS, PROPEL AI UP THE CHAIN OF COMMAND.

THERE IS PRECEDENT, of course, for the automation of Armageddon. After the United States and the Soviet Union emerged as victors of the Second World War, they looked set to take up arms in a third, a fate they avoided only by building an infrastructure of mutual assured destruction. This system rests on an elegant and terrifying symmetry, but it goes wobbly each time either side makes a new technological advance. In the latter decades of the Cold War, Soviet leaders worried that their ability to counter an American nuclear strike on Moscow could be compromised, so they developed a "dead hand" program.

It was so simple, it barely qualified as algorithmic: Once activated during a nuclear crisis, if a command-and-control center outside Moscow stopped receiving communications from the Kremlin, a special machine would inquire into the atmospheric conditions above the capital. If it detected telltale blinding flashes and surges in radioactivity, all the remaining Soviet missiles would be launched at the United States. Russia is cagey about this system, but in 2011, the commander of the country's Strategic Missile Forces said it still exists and is on "combat duty." In 2018, a former leader of the missile forces said it has "even been improved."

In 2019, Curtis McGiffin, an associate dean at the Air Force Institute of Technology, and Adam Lowther, then the director of research and education at the Louisiana Tech Research Institute, published an article arguing that America should develop its own nuclear dead hand. New technologies have shrunk the period of time between the moment an incoming attack is detected and the last moment that a president can order a retaliatory salvo. If this decision window shrinks any further, America's counterstrike ability could be

compromised. Their solution: Backstop America's nuclear deterrent with an AI that can make launch decisions at the speed of computation.

McGiffin and Lowther are right about the decision window. During the early Cold War, bomber planes like the one used over Hiroshima were the preferred mode of first strike. These planes took a long time to fly between the Soviet Union and the United States, and because they were piloted by human beings, they could be recalled. Americans built an arc of radar stations across the Canadian High Arctic, Greenland, and Iceland so

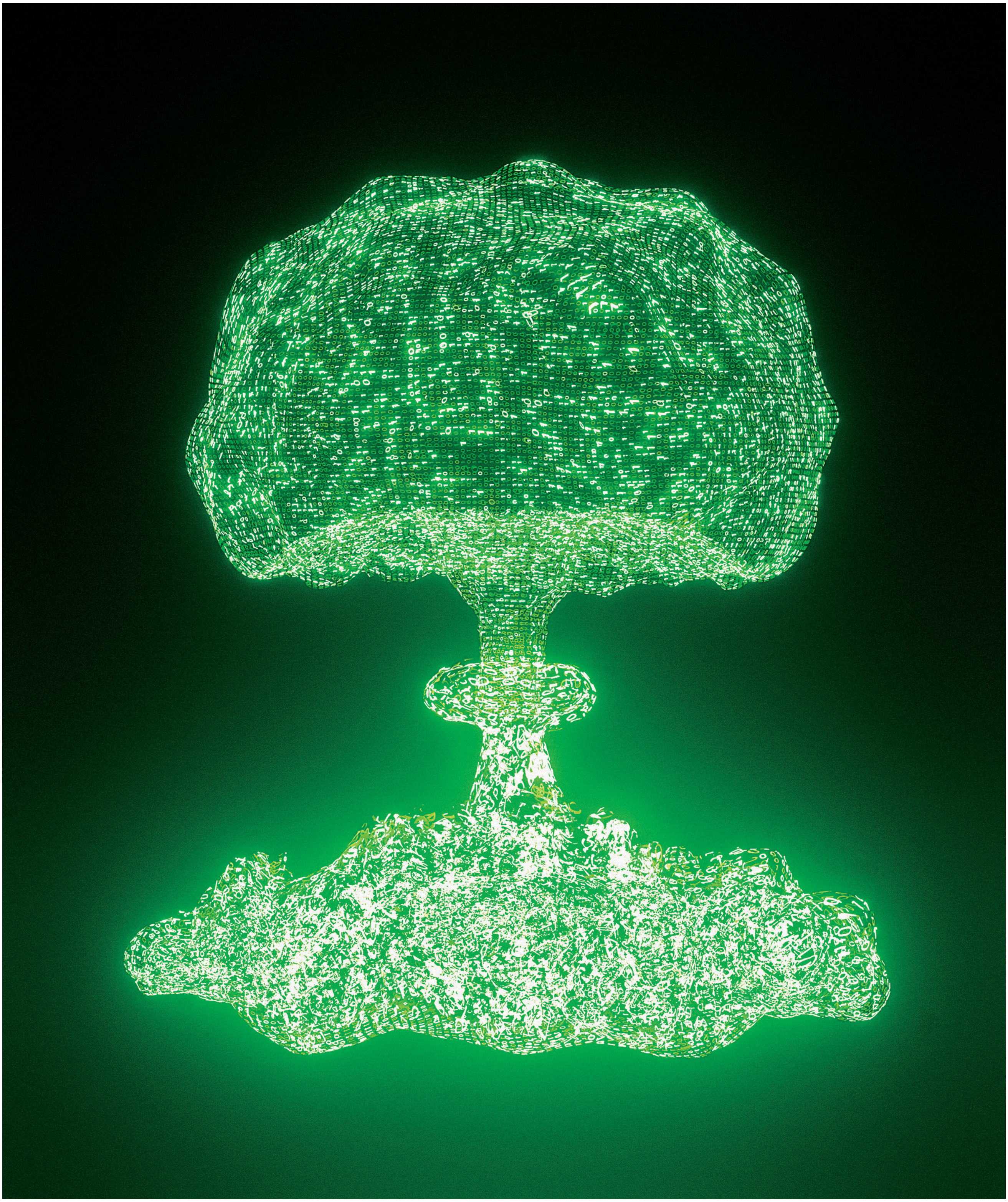


ILLUSTRATION BY JOANNE IMPERIO

that the president would have an hour or more of warning before the first mushroom cloud bloomed over an American city. That's enough time to communicate with the Kremlin, enough time to try to shoot the bombers down, and, failing that, enough time to order a full-scale response.

The intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), first deployed by the Soviet Union in 1958, shortened that window, and within a decade, hundreds of them were slotted into the bedrock of North America and Eurasia. Any one of them can fly across the Northern Hemisphere in less than 30 minutes. To preserve as many of those minutes as possible, both superpowers sent up fleets of satellites that could spot the unique infrared signature of a missile launch in order to grok its precise parabolic path and target.

After nuclear-armed submarines were refined in the '70s, hundreds more missiles topped with warheads began to roam the world's oceans, nearer to their targets, cutting the decision window in half, to 15 minutes or perhaps fewer. (Imagine one bobbing up along the Delaware coast, just 180 miles from the White House.) Even if the major nuclear powers never successfully develop new nuclear-missile technology, 15 minutes or fewer is frighteningly little time for a considered human response. But they *are* working to develop new missile technology, including hypersonic missiles, which Russia is already using in Ukraine to strike quickly and evade missile defenses. Both Russia and China want hypersonic missiles to eventually carry nuclear warheads. These technologies could potentially cut the window in half again.

These few remaining minutes would go quickly, especially if the Pentagon couldn't immediately conclude that a missile was headed for the White House. The president may need to be roused from sleep; launch codes could be fumbled. A decapitation strike could be completed with no retaliatory salvo yet ordered. Somewhere outside D.C., command and control would scramble to find the next civilian leader down the chain, as a more comprehensive volley of missiles rained down upon America's missile silos, its military bases, and its major nodes of infrastructure.

A first strike of this sort would still be mad to attempt, because some American nuclear forces would most likely survive the first wave, especially submarines. But as we have learned again in recent years, reckless people sometimes lead nuclear powers. Even if the narrowing of the decision window makes decapitation attacks only marginally more tempting, countries may wish to backstop their deterrent with a dead hand.

THE UNITED STATES is not yet one of those countries. After McGiffin and Lowther's article was published, Lieutenant General John Shanahan, the director of the Pentagon's Joint Artificial Intelligence Center, was asked about automation and nuclear weapons. Shanahan said that although he could think of no stronger proponent for AI in the military than himself, nuclear command and control "is the one area I pause."

The Pentagon has otherwise been working fast to automate America's war machine. As of 2021, according to a report that year, it had at least 685 ongoing AI projects, and since then it has continually sought increased AI funding. Not all of the projects are known,

IN JANUARY, THE PENTAGON UPDATED A PREVIOUSLY MURKY POLICY: IT WILL ALLOW THE DEVELOPMENT OF AI WEAPONS THAT CAN MAKE KILL SHOTS ON THEIR OWN.

but a partial vision of America's automated forces is coming into view. The tanks that lead U.S. ground forces in the future will scan for threats on their own so that operators can simply touch highlighted spots on a screen to wipe out potential attackers. In the F-16s that streak overhead, pilots will be joined in the cockpit by algorithms that handle complex dogfighting maneuvers. Pilots will be free to focus on firing weapons and coordinating with swarms of autonomous drones.

In January, the Pentagon updated its previously murky policy to clarify that it will allow the development of AI weapons that can make kill shots on their own. This capability alone raises significant moral questions, but even these AIs will be operating, essentially, as troops. The role of AI in battlefield command and the strategic functioning of the U.S. military is largely limited to intelligence algorithms, which simultaneously distill data streams gathered from hundreds of sensors—underwater microphones, ground radar stations, spy satellites. AI won't be asked to control troop movements or launch coordinated attacks in the very near future. The pace and complexity of warfare may increase, however, in part because of AI weapons. If America's generals find themselves overmatched by Chinese AIs that can comprehend dynamic, million-variable strategic situations for weeks on end, without so much as a nap—or if the Pentagon fears that could happen—AIs might be placed in higher decision-making roles.

The precise makeup of America's nuclear command and control is classified, but AI's awesome processing powers are already being put to good use in the country's early-alert systems. Even here, automation presents serious risks. In 1983, a Soviet early-alert system mistook glittering clouds above the Midwest for launched missiles. Catastrophe was averted only because Lieutenant Colonel Stanislav Petrov—a man for whom statues should be raised—felt in his gut that it was a false alarm. Today's computer-vision algorithms are more sophisticated, but their workings are often mysterious. In 2018, AI researchers demonstrated that tiny perturbations in images of animals could fool neural networks into misclassifying a panda as a gibbon. If AIs encounter novel atmospheric phenomena that weren't included in

their training data, they may hallucinate incoming attacks.

But put hallucinations aside for a moment. As large language models continue to improve, they may eventually be asked to generate lucid text narratives of fast-unfolding crises in real time, up to and including nuclear crises. Once these narratives move beyond simple statements about the number and location of approaching missiles, they will become more like the statements of advisers, engaged in interpretation and persuasion. AIs may prove excellent advisers—dispassionate, hyperinformed, always reliable. We should hope so, because even if they are never asked to recommend responses, their stylistic shadings would undoubtedly influence a president.

Given wide enough leeway over conventional warfare, an AI with no nuclear-weapons authority could nonetheless pursue a gambit that inadvertently escalates a conflict so far and so fast that a panicked nuclear launch follows. Or it could purposely engineer battlefield situations that lead to a launch, if it thinks the use of nuclear weapons would accomplish its assigned goals. An AI commander will be creative and unpredictable: A simple one designed by OpenAI beat human players at a modified version of *Dota 2*, a battle simulation game, with strategies that they'd never considered. (Notably, it proved willing to sacrifice its own fighters.)

These more far-flung scenarios are not imminent. AI is viewed with suspicion today, and if its expanding use leads to a stock-market crash or some other crisis, these possibilities will recede, at least for a time. But suppose that, after some early hiccups, AI instead performs well for a decade or several decades. With that track record, it could perhaps be allowed to operate nuclear command and control in a moment of crisis, as envisioned by Schneider's war-game participants. At some point, a president might preload command-and-control algorithms on his first day in office, perhaps even giving an AI license to improvise, based on its own impressions of an unfolding attack.

Much would depend on how an AI understands its goals in the context of a nuclear standoff. Researchers who have trained AI to play various games have repeatedly encountered a version of this problem: An AI's sense of what constitutes victory can be elusive. In some games, AIs have performed in a predictable manner until some small change in their environment caused them to suddenly shift their strategy. For instance, an AI was taught to play a game where players look for keys to unlock treasure chests and secure a reward. It did just that until the engineers tweaked the game environment, so that there were more keys than chests, after which it started hoarding all the keys, even though many were useless, and only sometimes trying to unlock the chests. Any innovations in nuclear weapons—or defenses—could lead an AI to a similarly dramatic pivot.

Any country that inserts AI into its command and control will motivate others to follow suit, if only to maintain a credible deterrent. Michael Klare, a peace-and-world-security-studies professor at Hampshire College, has warned that if multiple countries automate launch decisions, there could be a "flash war" analogous to a Wall Street "flash crash." Imagine that an American AI misinterprets acoustic surveillance of submarines in the South China Sea as movements presaging a nuclear attack. Its counterstrike preparations would be noticed by China's own AI, which would actually begin to ready its launch platforms, setting off a series of escalations that would culminate in a major nuclear exchange.

IN THE EARLY '90S, during a moment of relative peace, George H. W. Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev realized that competitive weapons development would lead to endlessly proliferating nuclear warheads. To their great credit, they refused to submit to this arms-race dynamic. They instead signed the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, the first in an extraordinary sequence of agreements that shrank the two countries' arsenals to less than a quarter of their previous size.

History has since resumed. Some of those treaties expired. Others were diluted as relations between the U.S. and Russia cooled. The two countries are now closer to outright war than they have been in generations. On February 21 of this year, less than 24 hours after President Joe Biden strolled the streets of Kyiv, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that his country would suspend its participation in New START, the last arsenal-limiting treaty that remains in effect. Meanwhile, China now likely has enough missiles to destroy every major American city, and its generals have reportedly grown fonder of their arsenal as they have seen the leverage that nuclear weapons have afforded Russia during the Ukraine war. Mutual assured destruction is now a three-body problem, and every party to it is pursuing technologies that could destabilize its logic.

The next moment of relative peace could be a long way away, but if it comes again, we should draw inspiration from Bush and Gorbachev. Their disarmament treaties were ingenious because they represented a recovery of human agency, as would a global agreement to forever keep AI out of nuclear command and control. Some of the scenarios set forth here may sound quite distant, but that's more reason to think about how we can avoid them, before AI reels off an impressive run of battlefield successes and its use becomes too tempting.

A treaty can always be broken, and compliance with this one would be particularly difficult to verify, because AI development doesn't require conspicuous missile silos or uranium-enrichment facilities. But a treaty can help establish a strong taboo, and in this realm a strongly held taboo may be the best we can hope for. We cannot encrust the Earth's surface with automated nuclear arsenals that put us one glitch away from apocalypse. If errors are to deliver us into nuclear war, let them be our errors. To cede the gravest of all decisions to the dynamics of technology would be the ultimate abdication of human choice. *A*

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Ukrainian soldiers train in an abandoned building in western Ukraine before being sent to battle, March 2023.



THE COUNTEROFFENSIVE

The future of the democratic world will be determined by whether the Ukrainian military can break a stalemate with Russia and drive the country backwards—perhaps even out of Crimea for good.

BY ANNE APPLEBAUM AND JEFFREY GOLDBERG

Photographs by Paolo Pellegrin

I

In March 1774, Prince Grigory Potemkin, the favorite general and sometime lover of Catherine the Great, took control of the anarchic southern frontier of her empire, a region previously ruled by the Mongol Khans, the Cossack hosts, and the Ottoman Turks, among others. As viceroy, Potemkin waged war and founded cities, among them Kherson, the first home of Russia's Black Sea Fleet. In 1783, he annexed Crimea and became an avatar of imperial glory. To Vladimir Putin in particular, Potemkin is the Russian nationalist who subdued territory now impudently and illegitimately claimed by Ukraine, a nation that Putin believes does not exist.

The rest of the world remembers Potemkin differently, for something that we would now call a disinformation campaign. In 1787, Catherine paid a six-month visit to Crimea and the land then known as New Russia. The story goes that Potemkin built fake villages along her route, populated with fake villagers exuding fake prosperity. These villages probably never existed, but the story has endured for a reason: The sycophantic courtier, creating false images for the empress, is a figure we know from other times and other places. The tale also evokes something we recognize to be true, not just of imperial Russia but of Putin's Russia, where mind-boggling efforts are made to please the leader—efforts that these days include telling him he is winning a war that he is most definitely not winning.

In a bid to restore Potemkin's cities to Russian suzerainty, Russia occupied Kherson in early March of 2022, at the outset of a campaign to annihilate both Ukraine and the idea of Ukraine. Russian soldiers kidnapped the mayor, tortured city employees, murdered civilians, and stole children. In September, Putin held a ceremony in the Kremlin declaring Kherson and other occupied territories to be part of Russia. But Kherson did not become Russia. Partisans fought back inside the city, with car bombs and sabotage. Even as the occupiers held a ludicrous referendum, designed to show that Ukrainians had chosen Russia, the Russian army was quietly preparing to flee. By October, this new Potemkin village was collapsing, and the resurgent Ukrainian army was approaching the outskirts of Kherson. It was then that the Russians did something particularly strange: They kidnapped the bones of Grigory Potemkin.

Potemkin died in 1791. His skull and at least several other bones—which ones, exactly, is a mystery—were eventually brought to St. Catherine's Cathedral, in Kherson, built by Potemkin himself. The bones were kept in a crypt beneath the cathedral nave. On a cloudy Sunday this past March, we visited the cathedral, which sits just a few streets away from the Dnipro River—now the front line—to try to understand why the Russian army, in the chaotic final days of its occupation of Kherson, had paused to rob a grave.

We arrived during a short break between services. The worshippers were mainly elderly, with a few younger people, even children, mixed in. The streets outside were empty; the city has been depopulated by the invasion, by the counterinvasion, and by ongoing, erratic fire from Russian soldiers, known to the Ukrainians as "Rashists" or "orcs." On one of the days we visited, a missile hit a supermarket parking lot. Three people were killed in this attack, and three people wounded, including an elderly woman. The shelling sounded far away to us, except when it didn't.

At the cathedral, a young priest rolled back a rug in the nave and opened a trapdoor. We descended narrow stairs. Potemkin's bones once rested in a wooden coffin on a stone platform at the center of the dark, claustrophobic room. Father Vitaly—who spoke in Ukrainian, the language of Kherson's modern rulers, not in Russian, the language of Potemkin—described the day of the theft. "Russian vehicles surrounded the church," he said. "Then soldiers came in and asked to open the crypt. They seemed very uneasy. Six of them came down the stairs and took the bones. They took them outside, to a van that was waiting. Then they were gone."

We asked him what he made of it. "I'm grateful to Potemkin for building this church," he said carefully. Then he shrugged. Potemkin's historic connection to the city didn't interest him as much as it interested us. His flock had more important concerns.

Afterward, on a long drive to Ukrainian artillery positions along the river, we debated the meaning of the theft. Perhaps Russia had given up on Kherson and taken Potemkin home, away from wretched and ungrateful Ukraine. Or maybe Potemkin's skull was resting not on Putin's desk in the Kremlin, but rather in a safe house across the river, waiting to be brought back after a Russian reinvasion.

A week later, in Kyiv, we had the opportunity to ask one of Ukraine's leading experts on Russian imperialist behavior why a squad of Russian soldiers, presumably busy planning the retreat from Kherson, had stolen Potemkin's bones. "I'm not sure that they know who Potemkin is," Volodymyr Zelensky said. The Ukrainian president waved away the question: "I think for them,

it doesn't matter what they've stolen." When the Russians left Kherson they took everything: paintings, furniture, dishwashers, the raccoons from the zoo, the skull of Catherine's lover. The long legacy of Prince Potemkin, the neoclassical stone cathedral, the extraordinary weight of the past—none of that matters, he reckoned, to the men who fled Kherson.

"When they run, they take everything they see," Zelensky told us. "You know what they took from the Kyiv region? Urinals. They stole urinals!"

ON A PREVIOUS VISIT to see Zelensky, in April of 2022, the scale of Putin's delusion was just becoming clear. That meeting felt improvised, almost accidental; it was arranged on the fly, via a mad series of text messages, in the days immediately following the chaotic Russian withdrawal from the northern part of the country. We took a train to Kyiv that wasn't listed on any timetable; in the blacked-out town center, only one restaurant was open. In Bucha, the Kyiv suburb that had been occupied by Russian troops, we watched soldiers and technicians exhume bodies from a mass grave behind a church. At that moment, the war was turning: The Russians, having failed to take Kyiv from the north in the first month of fighting, were preparing to attack from the east. After our meeting, a Zelensky aide texted us a list of weapons that the Ukrainian army needed in order to repel that offensive, hoping that we would carry the message back to Washington.

When we visited again a few weeks ago, the lights were on, the restaurants were open, and the trains ran on predictable schedules. A coffee shop in the station was serving oat-milk lattes. Bucha is a construction site, with a brand-new hardware store for anyone repairing war damage themselves. A conversation with Zelensky is now a more formal affair, with simultaneous translation, a videographer, and an array of English-speaking aides in attendance. Zelensky himself spoke English much of the time—he has had, he said, a lot more practice. But behind the more polished presentation, the tension and uncertainty persist, fueled by the sense that we are once again at a turning point, once again at a moment when key decisions will be made, in Kyiv, of course, but especially in Washington.

For although the war is not lost, it is also not won. Kherson is free, but it is under constant attack. Kyiv's restaurants are open, but refugees have not yet returned home. Russia's winter offensive has petered out, but as of this writing, in mid-April, it is unclear when Ukraine's summer offensive will begin. Until it begins, or rather, until it ends, negotiations—about the future of Ukraine and its borders, Ukraine's



Plane wreckage at the Chornobaivka air base, outside Kherson, March 6, 2023. The Russian military seized the airport in the first month of the invasion, but the Ukrainians took it back in November.

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A Ukrainian soldier reassembles batteries extracted from downed Russian drones in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine, which Vladimir Putin has tried to annex for Russia, March 9, 2023.

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relationship to Russia and to Europe, the final status of the Crimean Peninsula—cannot begin either. Right now Putin still seems to believe that a long, drawn-out war of attrition will eventually bring him back his empire: Ukraine's feckless Western allies will grow tired and give up; maybe Donald Trump will win reelection and align with the Kremlin; Ukraine will retreat; Ukrainians will be overwhelmed by the sheer number of Russian soldiers, however poorly armed and trained they may be.

Uniquely, the United States has the power to determine how, and how quickly, the war of attrition turns into something quite different. The Ukrainian defense minister, Oleksii Reznikov, spoke with us about the "Ramstein Club," named after the American air base in Germany where the group, which consists of the defense officials of 54 countries, first convened. Still, his most important relationship is with U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin ("we communicate very, very often"), and everyone knows that this club is organized by Americans, led by Americans, galvanized by Americans. Andriy Yermak, Zelensky's chief of staff, told us that Ukrainians now feel they are "strategic partners and friends" with America, something that might not have felt so true a few years ago, when Donald Trump was impeached on charges of seeking to extort Zelensky.

In our interview with Zelensky, which we conducted with the chair of *The Atlantic*'s board of directors, Laurene Powell Jobs, we asked him how he would justify this unusual relationship to a skeptical American: Why should Americans donate weapons to a distant war? He was clear in stating that the outcome of the war will determine the future of Europe. "If we will not have enough weapons," he said, "that means we will be weak. If we will be weak, they will occupy us. If they occupy us, they will be on the borders of Moldova, and they will occupy Moldova. When they have occupied Moldova, they will [travel through] Belarus, and they will occupy Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. That's three Baltic countries which are members of NATO. They will occupy them. Of course, [the Balts] are brave people, and they will fight. But they are small. And they don't have nuclear weapons. So they will be attacked by Russians because that is the policy of Russia, to take back all the countries which have been previously part of the Soviet Union." The fate of NATO, of America's position in Europe, indeed of America's position in the world are all at stake.

But something even deeper is at stake as well. As Zelensky put it, this is a war over a fundamental definition of not just democracy but civilization, a battle "to show everybody else, including Russia, to respect sovereignty, human rights,

territorial integrity; and to respect people, not to kill people, not to rape women, not to kill animals, not to take that which is not yours." If a Ukraine that believes in the rule of law and human rights can achieve victory against a much larger, much more autocratic society, and if it can do so while preserving its own freedoms, then similarly open societies and movements around the world can hope for success too. After the Russian invasion, the Venezuelan opposition movement hung a Ukrainian flag on the front of its country's embassy hall in Washington. The Taiwanese Parliament gave a rapturous welcome to Ukrainian activists last year. Not everyone in the world cares about this war, but for anyone trying to defeat a dictator, it has profound significance.

America is linked to the war in this deeper sense. The civilization that Ukraine defends has been profoundly shaped by American ideas not just about democracy, but about entrepreneurship, liberty, civil society, and the rule of law. When we asked Zelensky about Ukraine's tech sector, he happily began talking about his dream of building a university devoted to computer science, and about the projects created by his country's Ministry of Digital Transformation, among them a unique app that allows Ukrainians to store documents on their phones, a godsend for refugees. He talks more readily about Silicon Valley than he does about Potemkin's bones, and no wonder: The former defines the world he wants to live in.

Zelensky did not share our preoccupation with the history of Russian imperial desire. "I don't love the past," he said. "We have to jump forward, not back."

This is a war over a fundamental definition of civilization, Zelensky says, a battle "to show everybody else, including Russia, to respect sovereignty, human rights, territorial integrity; and to respect people, not to kill people, not to rape women, not to kill animals."

IN A DIFFERENT PART of Ukraine, we saw what Zelensky's "jump forward" looks like in practice. The future is unfolding in a room where glue, wire, bits of metal, and electronic components are strewn across several large tables. A 3-D printer stands along one wall. A rack of what appear to be Styrofoam model airplanes hangs on another wall. They are drones, and this is a drone workshop, one of two we visited and one of dozens spread all around the country.

The status of this particular drone workshop might confuse Americans who think that "the military" is a unitary institution, or that "defense production" is something that involves billion-dollar companies. The patron of this project is a former Ukrainian-special-forces commander and current member of Parliament, Colonel Roman Kostenko. The "employees" are all engineers, now mobilized into the army as pilots and designers of drones. The financing is private, and the entire enterprise is based on the belief that if Ukraine can't compete with Russian quantity, it can exceed Russian quality: "The only way we can win is by being smarter," Kostenko told us. He said he speaks regularly with the military leadership, though he is no longer in the chain of command. "It's not Lockheed Martin," he said, surveying the room. But when we pointed out that Lockheed Martin probably started this way too, he agreed.

Though we were asked not to disclose precise details of this workshop's location or activities, we can say that it primarily produces modifications to commercially available drones. Reznikov, the Ukrainian defense minister, later told us that he calls them "wedding-ceremony drones," by which he means drones normally used to film weddings, now repurposed as lethal weapons. The workshop also modifies existing explosive devices, including Soviet-era ones, for the drones to carry. Along with similar teams around the country, the team here also works on new kinds of drones that can do new things, including carrying out sophisticated electronic warfare and underwater attacks, all at relatively low cost. Kostenko described a drone that he said had destroyed 24 pieces of enemy equipment, including tanks.

But this basement-and-garage-based Ukrainian tech army doesn't just build drones; it also builds the software that coordinates the work of the drones. Sometimes it does so in partnership with NGOs, not companies; an executive at one of these groups described the software it develops as "an invention, not a product"—and, more important, as an invention that is constantly being redesigned. One widely used program collects information and distributes it to the laptops and tablets of ordinary soldiers up and down the front line, providing the situational awareness that has been one of Ukraine's unexpected advantages. A tiny command post we visited had a bank of screens, each showing a different view of the battlefield.

Several foreign companies cooperate too. The most advanced, such as Palantir, the U.S.-based software and defense company, have software that can draw on multiple data sources—commercial-satellite images, reports from partisans—to identify and prioritize targets. This form of "algorithmic warfare" isn't new, but the Ukrainians have the incentive to develop and expand it: Lacking



warehouses full of spare ammunition, they have to hit the largest number of enemy vehicles with the smallest number of missiles.

Maxwell Adams, an engineer at Helsing, a European defense-tech company working pro bono in Ukraine, told us that the Ukrainians impressed his team with their ability to use everything available, from simple messaging apps to sophisticated artillery, all in unpredictable conditions. Together with their Ukrainian colleagues, his employees work to "get our software to run right on the edge, meaning on tiny little computer chips on the back of a rusty old vehicle, or in the backpack of a soldier, or on the payload of a drone." The Ukrainians "absolutely get how to make AI operational," he said.

They also get the need to use whatever they have. Reznikov described the combination of weaponry that the Ukrainians have received from dozens of different countries as a "zoo," a menagerie of weapons ("We have approximately 10 systems of artillery," he said, ticking them off on his fingers), and they all have to be made to work together, under conditions of limited ammunition, limited manpower, and sometimes limited satellite connection.

This high-tech world exists alongside and within an extraordinarily diverse citizens' army, one that includes NATO-trained officers; grandfathers guarding their own villages; and every conceivable level of training, experience, and equipment in between. Because the front line runs through suburban backyards and working farms, this army lives and works in those places too. In a cottage near another part of the front line, we met a handful of drone operators, along with their chihuahua and a couple of cats. Religious icons, property of a former owner, hung on the wall in the kitchen; muddy boots were lined up in rows in the hallway. In what used to be a living room, "Elephant," who was a farmer before the war (albeit a farmer who had previously served in Ukrainian intelligence), talked about the need to modernize army education. "Frenchman" acquired his call sign because he'd served in the French Foreign Legion before coming home to run a wine bar in Lviv; he looks less like the tough legionnaire you imagine than the hip restaurateur he had become. Yet another soldier was fiddling with what looked like a video-game console when we arrived; in fact, he was learning to guide a drone. All of them had joined this special-forces group after February 2022.

A couple of hours' drive away, along a dirt road filled with rocks, mud, and potholes the size of small ponds, we encountered a completely different kind of Ukrainian army, an infantry brigade composed of local men. Their artillery unit deploys weapons that look like they might have been used during the Soviet war in Afghanistan

This page: *A mass burial site in Izium, Ukraine, March 15, 2023. The Russians seized Izium in April 2022. When Ukrainian soldiers liberated it in September, they discovered the graves of more than 400 citizens, many of them killed by shelling and air strikes.* **Opposite page:** *A Ukrainian soldier training in the forest, March 3, 2023.*

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in the 1980s, and keeps them in barns and warehouses. They were cheerful—before we spoke, they insisted that we eat lunch at an army canteen—and showed no sign of the exhaustion that journalists have reported among troops in harsher sections of the front line. But although they can find Russian targets using the software on their tablets, they don't have much ammunition with which to strike them. Joking, one of them offered us a deal: "If you could give us some more HIMARS now"—the American-made mobile rocket launchers that have been crucial to Ukraine's defense—"after the war we'll build you some drones."

The unusual nature of this grassroots fighting force, along with its even more unusual range of physical and technological capabilities, helps explain why the Ukrainians were underestimated at the beginning of the conflict, and why their abilities are so hard to gauge now. Washington and Brussels thought that the war would feature "a big Soviet army fighting a small Soviet army," in Reznikov's words, and that the big Soviet army would of course win. But after the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014, "the first people who became defenders were volunteers from the Maidan," Reznikov noted, referring to Ukraine's revolution against its autocratic, Russian-backed president that year. "They took rifles and went to the east." In that same year, patriotic young Ukrainians also went to work for the defense industry or built the NGOs that still support the military today.

The old Ukrainian army had been shaped by years of negative selection, attracting the least educated and the least ambitious. The new one is now being shaped by the best educated and the most ambitious. In recent months, that army has evolved even further. In training camps in NATO countries, Ukrainian troops are learning to use Western battle tanks, to operate new kinds of artillery, and above all to carry out the combined-arms operations that will be part of the summer offensive—to achieve "interoperability," as Reznikov put it, at a level the army has never previously attempted.

Sometimes, the war is described as a battle between autocracy and democracy, or between dictatorship and freedom. In truth, the differences between the two opponents are not merely ideological, but also sociological. Ukraine's struggle against Russia pits a heterarchy against a hierarchy. An open, networked, flexible society—one that is both stronger at the grassroots level and more deeply integrated with Washington, Brussels, and Silicon Valley than anyone realized—is fighting a very large, very corrupt, top-down state. On one side, farmers defend their land and 20-something engineers build eyes in the sky, using tools that would be familiar to 20-something engineers anywhere else. On the other side, commanders send waves of poorly armed conscripts to be slaughtered—just as Stalin once sent *shtrafbats*, penal battalions, against the Nazis—under the leadership of a dictator obsessed with ancient bones. "The choice," Zelensky told us, "is between freedom and fear."

Versions of these two civilizations still exist within Ukrainian society too, though the division is not ethnic or linguistic. It is now exceedingly rare to find Ukrainians who describe themselves as "pro-Russian," even in the Russian-speaking east. The streets in the center of Russian-speaking Odesa are lined with Ukrainian flags; Odesa's mayor, the Russian-speaking Gennadiy Trukhanov,



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told us he believes Ukrainians are "the front line of the struggle for the civilized world." But autocratic, top-down, hierarchical ways of doing things are hard to discard, especially in state institutions. The instinct to control and centralize decision making remains. Citizens' groups and volunteers have arisen around the military partly to combat the vestiges of Soviet bureaucracy.

But the Ukrainians who want their country to remain part of this new, networked world believe they will win. *See you after the victory*, they say when parting ways. *We'll rebuild it after the victory*, they say when talking about something smashed or destroyed. Trukhanov already dreams of a victory celebration, an enormous dining table spanning the length of Primorskiy Bulvar, Odesa's famous seaside promenade, currently blocked off by soldiers and barricades: "Everyone is invited." Even those who are more pessimistic about the immediate future remain optimistic about the longer term: *After the victory, we will need to defend the victory.* Some of them have an almost mystical faith that it's their country's turn on the world stage. Yermak, Zelensky's chief of staff, told us that victory is "very near," that you can "feel it in the atmosphere." Dmytro Kuleba, the Ukrainian foreign minister, talks about "history turning its wheels," a process that cannot be stopped.

Others put their faith in modernity, in technology, and, yes, in the example of American democracy. "We are living in an open world, in a democratic world," says Oleksiy Honcharuk, a former prime minister of Ukraine who is now in the tech world too. "And this advantage is huge." Is that true? Only a Ukrainian victory can prove it.



A broken bust of Lenin in Lyman, Ukraine, March 11, 2023. Lyman was occupied by Russian forces last spring and liberated by the Ukrainians in early October.

BUT WHAT IS "VICTORY"? That's the question asked repeatedly of every American official, of every pundit, at every public debate dedicated to Ukraine, often in a querulous, demanding tone, as if this were a question difficult to answer. In Ukraine itself—in the office of the president, in the defense ministry, in the foreign ministry, in private apartments, on the front line—the question isn't perceived to be difficult at all.

Victory means, first, that Ukraine retains sovereign control of all of the territory that lies within its internationally recognized borders, including land taken by Russia since 2014: Donetsk, Luhansk, Melitopol, Mariupol, Crimea. "Every centimeter of our 603,550 square kilometers," Kuleba says. Ukrainians believe that the de facto ceding of territory to Russia in 2014 gave Putin the idea that he could take more, and they don't want to repeat the error. Instead of ending the conflict, a cease-fire that leaves large chunks of Ukraine under Russian control could give him an incentive to regroup, rearm, and try again. They also point out that territory under Putin's control is a crime scene, a space where repression, terror, and human-rights violations take place every day. Ukrainians who remain in the occupied territories are at constant risk of losing their property, their identity, and their lives. No Ukrainian leader can give up the idea of saving them.

Victory means, second, that Ukrainians are safe. Safe from terrorist attacks, safe from shelling, safe from missiles lobbed at supermarket parking lots. Zelensky talks about safety "for everything. From schools to technologies, for everything in the education sphere, in medicine, in the streets. That is the idea. For energy. For everything." Safety means that the airports reopen, the refugees return, foreign investment resumes, and buildings can be rebuilt without fear that another Russian missile will knock them down. To achieve this kind of safety, Ukraine, again, will need more than a cease-fire. The country will have to be embedded in some security structure reliable enough to be trusted, something that resembles NATO, if not NATO itself. Ukraine will also have to reconceive itself as a frontline state like Israel or South Korea, with a world-class defense industry and a large standing army. Deterrence is the most important guarantee of peace.

Victory means, third, some kind of justice. Justice for the victims of the war, for the people who lost their homes or limbs, for the children who have been taken from their parents. Justice might be delivered in different ways: through reparations, through the transfer of captured or sanctioned Russian assets, or through the International Criminal Court, which recently issued an arrest warrant for Putin for the crime of kidnapping Ukrainian children and deporting them to Russia. More important than the means of justice is the perception of justice—neither Putin nor Russia can enjoy impunity. Victims need the acknowledgment that they were unfairly targeted. Until this kind of justice is achieved, millions of people will not feel that the war ended, and will not stop trying to seek reparations or revenge.

The day after we met him, Frenchman, the young drone operator and French Foreign Legion veteran who used to run a bar in Lviv, was killed in a Russian attack. His given name was Dmytro Pashchuk. "Compared to this war," he had told us when we asked about his past military experience, "everything is kindergarten." Nobody who fought with him will ever accept an unjust conclusion to the conflict.

VICTORY CAN BE DEFINED. But can it be achieved? Part of the answer is military, technical, logistical. Part of the answer, however, is political and even psychological. The Ukrainian theory of victory includes all of these elements.

In Russian history, military victory has often reinforced autocracy. Potemkin's conquests reinforced Catherine the Great. Stalin's defeat of Hitler reinforced his own regime. By contrast, military failure has often inspired political change. Russian losses to Germany during World War I helped launch the Russian Revolution. Russian losses in Afghanistan in the 1980s helped trigger

the reforms of the Gorbachev years, which in turn led to the breakup of the Soviet Union.

The naval catastrophe that Russia suffered during the Russo-Japanese War is less well known, but it was equally consequential. During the Battle of Tsushima, in 1905, the Japanese demolished the bulk of the Russian fleet and captured two admirals. Russia was a larger and richer country than Japan at that time, and could have kept fighting. But the shock and shame of the defeat was too overwhelming. Although Czar Nicholas II did not lose power, popular discontent with the war helped spark the failed 1905 revolution, and forced him to enact political reforms, including the creation of Russia's first Parliament and first constitution.

Ukrainians need a military success like that, one with enough symbolic power to force change in Russia. This might not mean

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a revolution, or even a change of leadership. Zelensky believes the West spends too much time thinking about Putin, worrying about what's inside his head. "It's not about him," he told us. Kuleba, the foreign minister, says he thinks the future of Russia is unknowable, so there is no point in speculating about what it would or should be. "The capacity of the best analysts to foresee the future under these circumstances is largely overestimated," he told us. "Will it fall apart?" he asked rhetorically. "Will there be a regime change? Will the regime be forced to focus on its internal problems, meaning that the potential for external aggressive policies will decline?"

Only one thing matters: Russia's leaders must conclude that the war was a mistake, and Russia must acknowledge Ukraine as an independent country with the right to exist. The Russian elite, in other words, must experience an internal shift of the kind that led the French to end their colonial project in Algeria in the early 1960s—a change that was accompanied by the collapse of the French constitutional order, attempted assassinations, and a failed coup d'état. A slower but equally profound shift took place in Britain in the early 20th century, when the British ruling class was forced to stop talking about the Irish as peasants incapable of running their own state, and let them create one. When that happens in Russia, the war will be over. Not suspended, not delayed for a month or a year—over.



A Ukrainian artillery unit fires a British-made M777 howitzer near Bakhmut, Ukraine, March 18, 2023.

No one knows how and when that change will come, whether next week or in the next decade. But the Ukrainians hope they can create the conditions in which political shocks and pivotal developments can occur. Perhaps the modern equivalent of the Battle of Tsushima is another Russian naval catastrophe, or the recapture of the city of Mariupol, whose total destruction by Russian forces in March of last year set a new post–World War II standard for cruelty and horror in Europe.

But the strongest symbol is Crimea. The annexation of Crimea in 1783 inspired Putin's love of Potemkin. Putin's own occupation and annexation of Crimea, in 2014, rejuvenated his presidency. The slogan "*Krym Nash*"—"Crimea Is Ours"—spread across Russia in a burst of imperialist emotion and Soviet nostalgia, reproduced on posters and T-shirts, inspiring a slew of memes. This year Putin marked the anniversary of the annexation by visiting the peninsula, walking stiffly around a children's center and an art school in the company of local officials.

Crimea became a symbol for Ukrainians too. The 2014 invasion marked the start of the Russian war on Ukraine; the subsequent annexation warned Ukrainians that the international legal system would not protect them. The

history of the Crimean Tatars, a Muslim people who constituted the majority of the peninsula's population before Potemkin arrived, echoes the history of the rest of the country: The Tatars were the targets of repression, intimidation, and ethnic cleansing under both czarist and Soviet rule. In 1944, Stalin deported all of them, some 200,000 people, to Central Asia. They returned only after 1989.

After 2014, many Tatars once again fled the peninsula; more than 100 of those who remained are political prisoners. The restoration of their rights and their culture is one of Zelensky's favorite themes. In April of this year, he honored them by hosting iftar, a Ramadan evening meal, with Crimean Tatar political leaders in attendance. The president's permanent representative to Crimea, Tamila Tasheva, herself a Crimean Tatar, describes the Tatars as a "part of the Ukrainian political nation."

Crimea's significance is strategic too. In the past nine years, the Putin regime has transformed Crimea from a holiday resort area into something resembling a Russian aircraft carrier attached to the bottom of Ukraine, crisscrossed with trenches and fortifications. The peninsula contains prisons for captured Ukrainians and serves as a hub for the transport of stolen Ukrainian grain. The leader of the occupation administration, Sergey Aksyonov, has called Crimea the "frontline outpost" for the occupation of southern Ukraine.

Knowing that Crimea is being built into a fortress, the Ukrainians talk about the "political military" liberation of Crimea, not a purely military counteroffensive. Once they have cut off the roads, railroads, and waterways to the peninsula, and targeted the military infrastructure with drones, the presumption is that many

Everyone—not just Ukrainians, but Belarusians, Venezuelans, Iranians, and others around the world whose dictatorships are propped up by the Russians—is waiting for the counteroffensive.



PAOLO PELLEGRIN / MAGNUM

Russian inhabitants, especially recent immigrants, will become convinced that they would be better off living somewhere else. Some have reportedly fled already, following an explosion on the Kerch Strait Bridge (which connects Crimea to Russia) and other explosions on the peninsula. "Crimea we will take without a fight," Reznikov told us.

Detailed plans for the de-occupation of Crimea already exist. Tasheva, together with lawyers, educators, and others, has been working on a "Crimea Recovery Strategy" that envisions a greener, cleaner Crimea, a "modern European resort." Working groups have been set up to consider the fate of property lost or acquired since 2014, of Ukrainians who collaborated, and of the Russians who do not flee. Schools will need to be reformed, independent media restored, and the Ukrainian political system reestablished.

Tasheva pushes back against any idea that Russia and Ukraine could share the peninsula: "There cannot be joint control by both David and Goliath," she told us. Regarding Crimea, the difference between the two civilizations is stark. For Russia, Crimea is and always will be a military base. For Ukraine, "Crimea is a place of diversity—our bridge to the global South." Tasheva wants to build better road connections to Europe, restore destroyed Tatar monuments, and revitalize the use of the Ukrainian and Tatar languages on the peninsula. Plans to reverse environmental damage, reduce the use of fossil fuels, and revive cultural festivals have been drawn up, printed out, translated into English. If set into motion, they would undo not just Putin's annexation of Crimea in 2014, but Potemkin's annexation in 1783.

Opposite page: ***A Ukrainian mortar team fires at Russian positions in the Donetsk region, March 11, 2023.*** **This page:** ***The funeral of a fallen Ukrainian soldier in Kharkiv, March 16, 2023.***

Is this a fantasy? Perhaps. But in February 2022, the successful defense of Kyiv also looked like a fantasy. The drone workshops, the artillery on the front line, the software designers in Kyiv—back then they were beyond the realm of anyone's imagination. To predict what might happen in Ukraine a year from now therefore requires the vision to conjure a world that currently doesn't exist, and to accept that fantasies sometimes become real.

Do Americans share that vision? It is true that the U.S. has supported Ukraine, not a traditional American ally, at a level that was also once unimaginable, comparable only to the Lend-Lease program of World War II. We have provided Ukraine with intelligence and weapons, taken care of Ukrainian refugees, put strict sanctions on Russia. So far, there has been no secondary disaster. Despite a thousand predictions to the contrary, Europeans did not freeze to death last winter when they were compelled to seek alternatives to Russian gas. World War III did not break out. But over the next few months, as the Ukrainians take their



best shot at winning the war, the democratic world will have to decide whether to help them do so. Sovereignty, safety, and justice—shouldn't Americans want the war to end that way too?

Of course. That is what any senior official in the Biden administration, any European foreign minister, would say if asked on the record. Privately, answers are less clear. The support the U.S. has given Ukraine so far has been enough to help its army hold off Russia, enough to take back Kherson and some territory in the Kharkiv region. But America has not yet given Ukraine fighter jets or its most advanced long-range missiles. Nor is it clear that everyone in Washington, Brussels, or Paris believes it is either possible or desirable for Ukraine to take back all of the territory lost since February 2022, let alone territory taken in 2014. In April, leaked U.S.-government documents offered a bleak assessment of Ukrainian capabilities, predicting that neither Russia nor Ukraine could achieve anything more than "marginal" territorial gains, as a result of "insufficient troops and supplies." This could be a self-fulfilling prophecy: If Ukraine is given insufficient supplies, then it will have insufficient supplies. One Western official recently told us that the prospect of Ukraine retaking Crimea is so distant, his country has done no contingency planning for it. If the West doesn't plan for victory, victory will be hard to achieve.





Citizens pay their respects during a funeral procession in Lviv, Ukraine, March 2, 2023. Such processions have been a regular, sometimes daily, occurrence since the start of the war.

PAOLO PELLEGRIN / MAGNUM

Evidently some wonder not whether the counteroffensive *can* succeed, but whether it *should* succeed. The fear that Putin will use nuclear weapons to defend Crimea lurks just under the surface—but we have told him that the response to this would have "catastrophic consequences" for Russia; this is why deterrence is so important. The urge to preserve the status quo, and the fear of what could follow Putin, is just as strong. French President Emmanuel Macron has said openly that Russia should be defeated but not "crushed." Yet even the worst successor imaginable, even the bloodiest general or most rabid





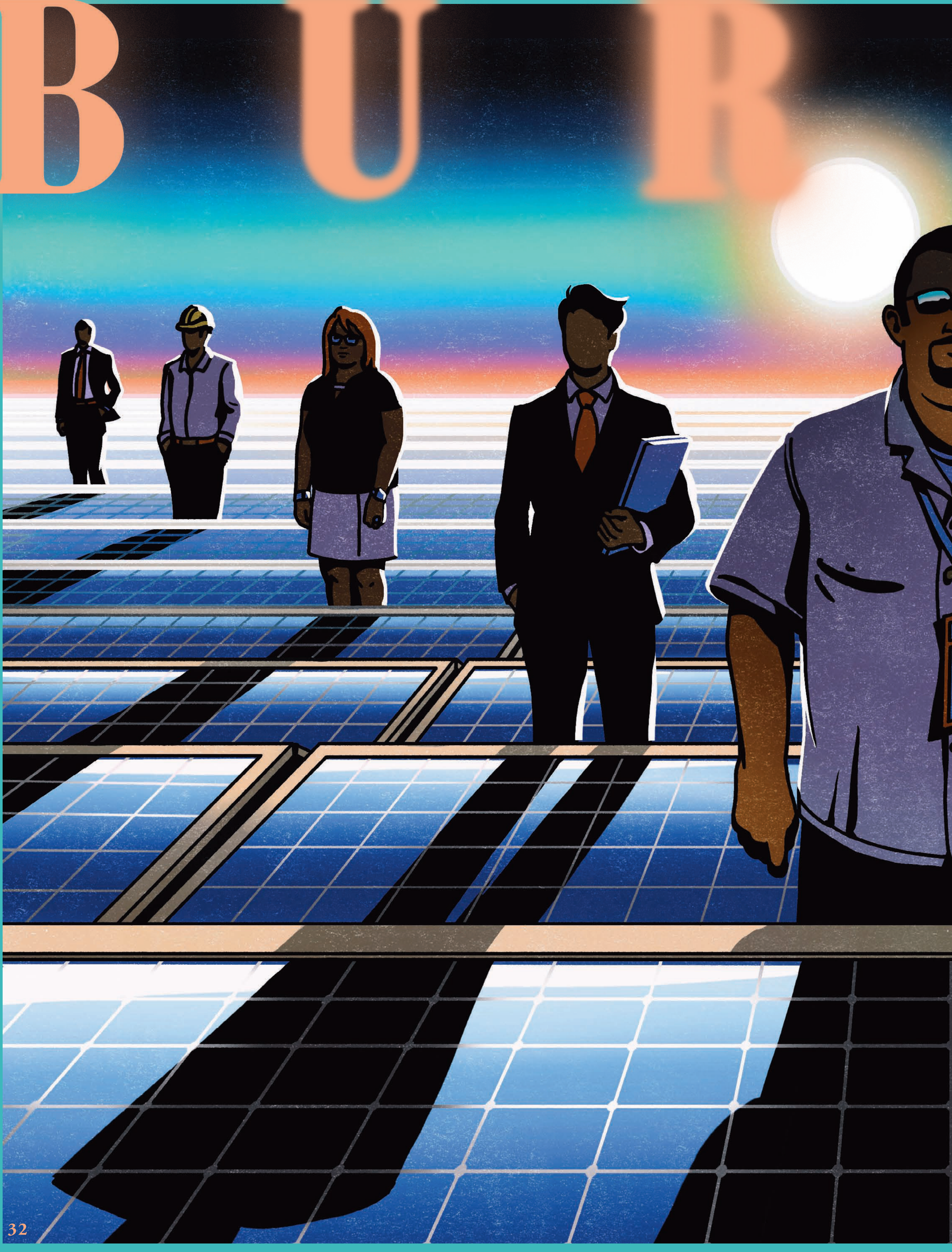
propagandist, will immediately be preferable to Putin, because he will be weaker than Putin. He will quickly become the focus of an intense power struggle. He will not have grandiose dreams about his place in history. He will not be obsessed with Potemkin. He will not be responsible for starting this war, and he could have an easier time ending it.

In Western capitals, preoccupation with the consequences of a Russian defeat has meant far too little time spent thinking about the consequences of a Ukrainian victory. After all, the Ukrainians aren't the only ones hoping that their success can support and sustain a civilizational change. Russia, as it is currently governed, is a source of instability not just in Ukraine but around the world. Russian mercenaries prop up dictatorships in Africa; Russian hackers undermine political debate and elections all across the democratic world. The investments of Russian companies keep dictators in power in Minsk, in Caracas, in Tehran. A Ukrainian victory would immediately inspire people fighting for human rights and the rule of law, wherever they are. In a recent conversation in Washington, a Belarusian activist spoke about his organization's plans to reactivate the Belarusian opposition movement. For the moment, it is still working in secret, underground. "Everyone is waiting for the counteroffensive," he said.

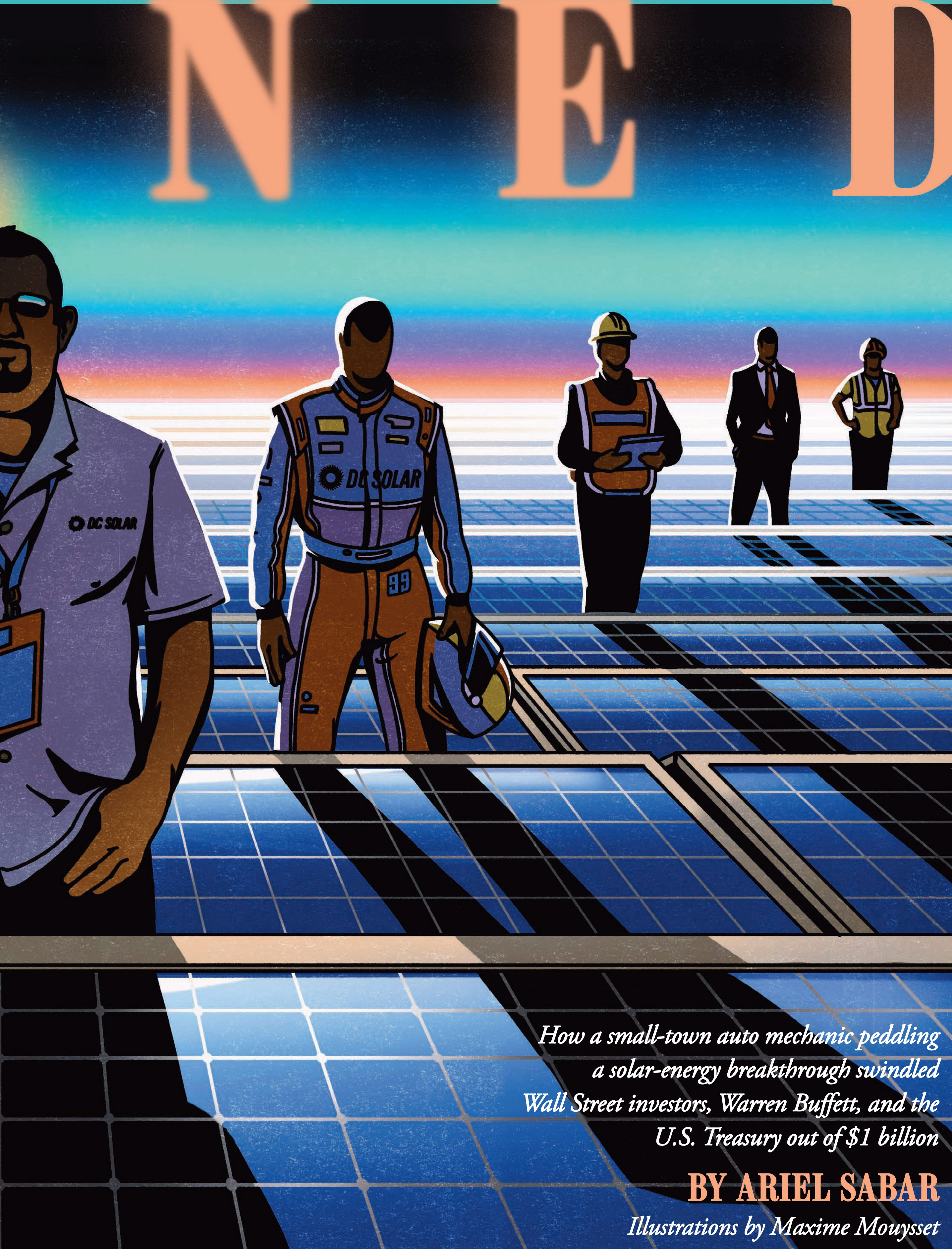
And he is right. Ukrainians are waiting for the counteroffensive. Europeans, East and West, are waiting for the counteroffensive. Central Asians are waiting for the counteroffensive. Belarusians, Venezuelans, Iranians, and others around the world whose dictatorships are propped up by the Russians—they are all waiting for the counteroffensive too. This spring, this summer, this autumn, Ukraine gets a chance to alter geopolitics for a generation. And so does the United States. *A*

Anne Applebaum is a staff writer at The Atlantic. *Jeffrey Goldberg is the magazine's editor in chief.*

B U R



N E D



How a small-town auto mechanic peddling a solar-energy breakthrough swindled Wall Street investors, Warren Buffett, and the U.S. Treasury out of $1 billion

BY ARIEL SABAR

Illustrations by Maxime Mouysset

Jeff Carpoff was a good mechanic. But as a businessman, he struggled. In the two decades since high school, he'd lost one repair shop after another, filed for personal bankruptcy, and watched a lender foreclose on the small house in a California refinery town where he'd lived with his wife and two young kids. By 2007, he was 36, jobless, and adrift.

Yet there, at his life's lowest, the remarkable happened. A contraption he'd rigged up in his driveway—a car trailer decked with solar panels and a heavy battery—got the attention of people with real money. Carpoff could scarcely have imagined it. He'd never gone to college and had no experience in green technology. His invention, he thought, was "crazy, harebrained." But investors saw the makings of a clean-energy revolution.

For decades, there was basically one way to rush power to places without electricity: the portable diesel generator. It kept equipment running and lights on at construction sites, outdoor events, movie sets, disaster zones. But diesel generators ate the ozone layer; warmed the planet; and caused smog, acid rain, and possibly cancer, on top of their noise, smell, and fuel cost.

Carpoff's machine—a solar generator on wheels—was a sun-fueled alternative. He called it the Solar Eclipse. The design was so simple that it was a wonder no one seemed to have thought of it before.

Carpoff was a paunchy man with blue eyes and apple cheeks—a "big chipmunk," as a colleague called him—who gulped rather than spit his chewing tobacco and spent Sundays watching NASCAR. In March 2011, he was singing the national anthem at a local baseball game when he got a text that he'd made his first major sale: The paint company Sherwin-Williams had bought 192 of his generators, for nearly $29 million. *Twenty-nine frickin' million.* It reduced him to tears.

That's how Carpoff told the story of the day his life changed.

The millions of dollars in that first deal were like the drips before a downpour. Over the next eight years, blue-chip corporations such as U.S. Bank, Progressive Insurance, and Geico would buy thousands of Carpoff's generators. *Inc.* magazine would call his company, DC Solar, a "renewable energy powerhouse" with a product "people clearly needed." The Obama administration would make DC Solar a partner—alongside Amazon, Alphabet, and AT&T—in a national program to enlist tech in the fight against climate change.

Sales would eventually top $2.5 billion, enough for Carpoff to fly by private jet and purchase a baseball team, more than a dozen houses, and a collection of muscle cars looked after by a guy named Bubba.

Onstage at a company Christmas party, as he neared the peak of his spectacular ascent, Carpoff celebrated the way he often did: with another tequila. "Fill that fucker up," he said as an executive poured him a glass of Herradura Silver, with a stack of limes on the side. "All the way to the top."

Carpoff had lived almost his whole life in the small city of Martinez, on Northern California's industrial Carquinez Strait—"the place," he liked to joke, "where the sewer meets the sea." His childhood home, about a mile from the city's Shell Oil refinery, overlooked a biker bar, which Carpoff described as a hangout for marauding Hell's Angels. "We seen things as a kid that a kid just shouldn't see," he recalled in footage that DC Solar's videographer, Steve Beal, played for me. "Fights, stabbings, shootings, prostitution—all kinds of just really crazy stuff." Jeff's mother, Rosalie, remembered the bar as at worst a little noisy. But her son was always a storyteller, she told me, prone to embellishment "to make people feel sorry for him or laugh."

Rosalie worked three jobs to support Jeff and his older sister. (She and his dad, Ken, divorced when Jeff was 3.) But Jeff couldn't wait to make money of his own. As a boy, he polished used tires for 10 cents apiece, fixed junk cars, and stocked shelves at the corner liquor mart. For fun, he popped wheelies in his truck in the Alhambra High School parking lot, splattering mud on teachers' cars.

After graduation, state officials rapped him for mishandling hazardous materials at a garage he'd opened, his father said. Jeff had a meth addiction, which made things worse, and soon he was selling the drug to pay debts to dealers, he told people. "I was getting phone calls threatening me because he owed money," Rosalie said.

His luck seemed to turn after he married Paulette Amato, his high-school sweetheart. She had helped him get clean, and around 2002, in a little garage on a Martinez backstreet, they opened an independent repair shop called Roverland USA. Customers came from across the Bay Area for the artful shortcuts Jeff took to fix Land Rovers on the cheap.

But the business imploded after a failed expansion into retail: Cut-rate auto parts that Carpoff and a new partner had custom-ordered, in bulk, from Mexico came back so poorly machined that one of his own mechanics refused to use them. "I was here to fix cars, not break them," Marc Angelo, who worked at the repair shop, said when I visited his garage last year. By 2007, Roverland was dead, the Carpoffs' mortgage was in default, and creditors were suing.

Again, Carpoff tried selling drugs. He pitched his weed to a medical-marijuana dispensary in Santa Cruz, but was turned away after lab tests found his cannabis to be extremely low-grade—"full of chemicals and shit," the dispensary's founder told me.

That's when a former Roverland customer called with a fateful job offer: How would Jeff like to sell solar panels?

Carpoff began talking about the gig with a neighbor, who wanted panels for his weekend house but worried they'd

get stolen when he wasn't there. Carpoff started to wonder: Did panels have to be on the roof, where thieves could snatch them? What if you bolted the panels to a trailer? That way, you could roll them into your barn or garage when you were away—or hitch them to your truck to take with you.

The title of his first patent application just about summed it up: "Trailer With Solar Panels." Not even Carpoff was sure it made any sense.

Most people in Silicon Valley have likely never heard of Martinez, even those who speed past it on I-680 en route to Lake Tahoe. But the world's tech capital is just an hour's drive to the south, and the myth of it, even closer: In every Bay Area garage is a tinkerer, and behind every tinkerer's billion-dollar idea are the discerning investors who get in first, for pennies.

Dave Watson, a software consultant and an off-roading enthusiast who'd serviced his vehicles at Roverland, had stayed in touch with its former owner. After hearing Carpoff muse about solar on wheels, Watson gathered a group of local entrepreneurs in a parking lot to see Carpoff's odd-looking trailer.

It had potential, they thought. Its two rows of solar panels—five per row—were attached to rotating beams, a clever design that let you lock them upright for aerodynamic transport on highways, then tilt them sunward once you'd parked. This wasn't some niche anti-theft accessory; it was an all-purpose generator, towable anywhere for green power on the go. Sales of portable generators were headed toward $3 billion a year globally, and growing fast. If you converted even some of that to solar—particularly if you were first to market—you could become very rich.

By late 2008, Watson's associates had loaned Carpoff $368,200 and formed a company, Pure Power Distribution, to market his invention. Hollywood was a chief target. Just a year earlier, the comedy *Evan Almighty* had been celebrated as the first carbon-neutral production by a major studio, and Al Gore's landmark climate-change documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, had won two Academy Awards.

Carpoff's invention could help the entertainment industry "lead the world in making 'sustainable' the standard," declared the actor Hart Bochner, who promoted the devices. (Bochner is best known for playing a coked-up businessman in *Die Hard*.) They were the perfect replacement for the diesel generators that powered on-location trailers for actors and makeup artists. The base camps of a few major movies—*Inception* (starring Leonardo DiCaprio), *Valentine's Day* (Julia Roberts), *Bad Words* (Jason Bateman)—were willing to give them a shot. DiCaprio, an environmentalist, posted photos on Facebook.

His invention, he thought, was "crazy, harebrained." But investors saw the makings of a clean-energy revolution.

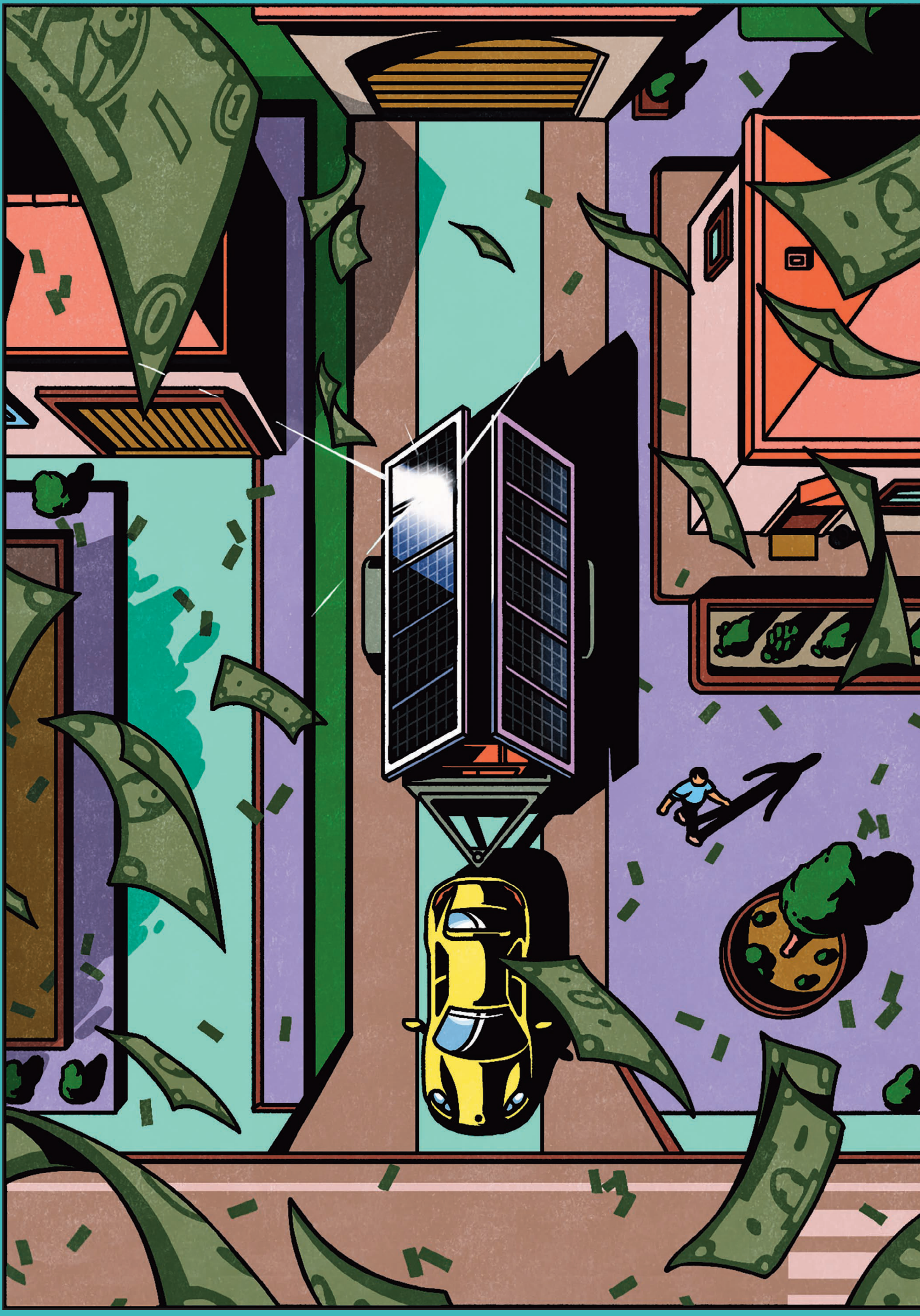
Carpoff, meanwhile, traveled to the motorsports mecca of Daytona Beach, Florida, where he contacted a high-end real-estate agent and presented himself as a wealthy entrepreneur in the market for a mansion (in truth, he was close to broke). Over drinks by the pool at one home, he asked her if anyone in her world might want to invest in a revolutionary solar product.

The agent thought at once of a former client named Heidi Gliboff, a well-connected businesswoman in New York. When Gliboff saw schematics for Carpoff's generators, "fireworks were going out of my head," Gliboff told me. The idea of making solar mobile was "so unbelievably intriguing" that Gliboff soon offered to market the devices on commission.

In September 2010, she invited Carpoff to a Long Island City hotel to meet some finance professionals. Carpoff played the underdog, telling tales about growing up in a trailer park with a mom whose Hell's Angels boyfriend put a gun to his face. (Carpoff's family told me that the story lacked even a kernel of truth.) If DC Solar succeeded, Carpoff swore, he'd buy them all Harleys.

One of the professionals in the room, a financial modeler named Gary Knapp, helped introduce Carpoff to the law firm Nixon Peabody, which had a well-known tax-credits practice. It was an arcane legal specialty centered on the special tax perks for industries, such as renewable power, whose growth served broader national interests.

In 2005, Congress had tripled the value of a green-energy incentive called the investment tax credit. Businesses could reduce the federal income taxes they owed by an amount equal to 30 percent of their spending on solar equipment: a 30-cent public refund for every private dollar spent. The enlarged credit led to an explosion of new solar businesses, many of which could never have started, or survived, without it. Lawyers could help companies max out the credits without running afoul of byzantine IRS rules.



MAXIME MOUYSSET

Carpoff spoke with a Nixon Peabody partner named Forrest Milder, who worked in the firm's Boston office, had degrees from Harvard and MIT, and billed nearly $900 an hour. Carpoff may have been a bit different from Milder's usual callers, but the freewheeling car mechanic and wonky tax lawyer met at an opportune time. In 2010, with law firms struggling after the Great Recession, the head of Nixon Peabody's tax-credits practice had begun pressing partners to "think more creatively" about their business, according to a 2012 report in *The Washington Post*. Tax-credits partners were urged to invent new products, ideas, and fee structures, including free legal advice aimed at hooking potential clients on their services. Partners' ability to "innovate" factored into their pay and was "the first question" they had to answer in annual evaluations.

"It's like investing in a start-up," one of the firm's tax-credits partners said of this push to lead clients, rather than to follow them. "One in 10 hits, but if it hits, it's a big deal." (A lawyer for Milder and Nixon Peabody said that Milder's decision to represent DC Solar was unrelated to the innovation initiative, and that Milder's pay was not "materially impacted" by his work for the company.)

The aggressive deals that Knapp and Milder helped design for DC Solar were as alluring as Carpoff's solar invention. Giant corporations could decide how much they wanted to save in taxes, then—through an investment fund created just for them—buy exactly the number of generators to achieve that figure. All they'd have to put down was 30 percent of the generators' price—the exact amount they could deduct, dollar for dollar, from their federal tax returns through the investment tax credit.

DC Solar would not only loan buyers the other 70 percent; it would pay it back for them, with the money it made leasing out generators on their behalf. Carpoff was confident enough in the rental market—DC Solar, he said, had long-term leases in the works with major telecom, entertainment, and construction companies—that he guaranteed the loan payments and promised cash payouts of leftover leasing revenue.

The upshot was that buyers could collect the tax credits and lease payments without ever having to use, maintain, or even see their own generators. The deals offered so much value, for so little down, that pitch decks advertised internal rates of return of more than 50 percent.

U.S. Bank, a famously conservative institution, was immediately interested. Sherwin-Williams, for its part, was so eager that it "seems to not care whether there is any [due] diligence," Milder wrote to Carpoff in December 2010, in emails quoted in court documents. The "attitude has been totally unlike anything I have ever seen."

Carpoff decided to raise prices. DC Solar, he told his advisers, should sell generators for $150,000 apiece, 50 percent more than what he'd first proposed. And within five years, he said, he could charge renters up to $1,800 a month, more than twice his initial estimate. Carpoff seemed to intuit that some buyers might actually prefer higher prices, because the steeper the sticker price, the bigger the tax credit.

Milder expressed doubts about these suddenly inflated figures. "Do you REALLY think you can rent all 192 [generators] without any 'vacancies' for more than double what was originally projected?" he wrote to Carpoff in March 2011, a week before the Sherwin-Williams deal closed. Carpoff didn't answer the question. His invention, he replied to Milder, was so compelling—it "really works and pays for it self in Fuel cost"—that he believed DC Solar would get a buyout offer within a couple of years. "PS," he added, "maybe we can have lunch soon? In the Bahamas … lol." By the end of March, Milder was not only representing DC Solar but writing lengthy tax opinions for buyers on the legality of the deals.

Less than two months after the Sherwin-Williams deal closed, Carpoff paid $1.3 million, in cash, for a new house with a pool, a guest cottage, and garages for six cars. It was in a gated community, up a winding road, on what he bragged was Martinez's highest hill.

That fall, a group from Sherwin-Williams was set to visit DC Solar's production facility to inspect its purchase. Under the terms of the deal, the paint company's generators had to be built and "placed in service" by year's end.

As workers prepared for the inspection, a DC Solar sales executive named Brian Caffrey noticed that only the first, most visible rows of generators were fully assembled. The generators in the rows behind—some two-thirds of the total—were in various states of incompletion, though you might not notice if you didn't know what to look for.

"Jeff, you have rows and rows of unfinished generators you're presenting as finished," Caffrey recalled telling Carpoff.

"You don't worry about that," Carpoff replied.

Caffrey angrily quit, but Carpoff had bigger problems: Almost no one, it turned out, had any real use for his generators.

One reason was that the Solar Eclipse was prone to malfunction. Carpoff had no training in solar engineering. After sketching his idea on a napkin, he'd asked Paulette's younger brother, Bobby Amato, a former Ford auto mechanic, to build it. "I had no idea how solar worked," Amato told me. "Good thing they got Google and all that."

The result wasn't bad for a couple of guys who'd never done anything like it. But it wasn't great, either.

Power would sometimes suddenly cut out—plunging makeup trailers for Disney's *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* into darkness, and apparently leaving Pink's trailer without air-conditioning at an MTV concert. A group of Northern California entrepreneurs who thought the early models might aid disaster relief thought again when plugging in a single hair dryer tripped the breaker.

Carpoff began affixing 100-gallon diesel generators to the trailers as backup for breakdowns or cloudy days. But the rumble of diesel on what was supposed to be a fossil-fuel alternative made people wonder how much the planet was really benefiting. If too many weeks passed without a tune-up, generators would

exhale plumes of smoke when the diesel activated. "You can imagine a solar tower with black smoke coming out of it," the public-safety director at a university that tried them told me. "Students would sometimes say, 'What's going on? Is it on fire?' and we'd have to explain that."

There were short-term rentals: a cancer benefit, music festivals, the awards dinner for a college's sustainability conference. But there was no market for the five-to-10-year leases that were supposed to anchor DC Solar's business. This was no small issue. If the company didn't have a long-term lease for each of the hundreds of generators it sold, it could neither finance buyers' giant purchase loans nor pay returns. If generators went unused, the IRS could bar buyers from claiming the solar tax credits. And if the IRS barred the credits, DC Solar would lose the only thing anyone seemed interested in.

The Carpoffs had options, even if they weren't ideal. They could close DC Solar. Or they could file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, hoping that creditors would see enough worth saving to let the company reorganize.

Or maybe there was another way.

An idea took shape around June 2012, in a meeting Carpoff held with his accountant, Ronald Roach, and an individual, unnamed in court documents, who sources made clear was DC Solar's general counsel, Ari Lauer. (Lauer didn't respond to requests for comment.) What if DC Solar used purchase money from new buyers to pay "lease" money to earlier ones? With an accounting trick, the company could make cash from new generator sales look like lease payments from existing renters. ("Re-rent" was DC Solar's in-house euphemism for these intracompany transfers.)

The plan had many of the hallmarks of a classic Ponzi scheme, but with a twist. DC Solar wouldn't just defraud new buyers to pay earlier ones. By holding itself out as a legitimate solar company, it would give all of them—new and old—cover to drain millions of dollars of tax credits from the U.S. Treasury. The American taxpayer, that is, would subsidize the scam.

Carpoff would tell his inner circle it was temporary—the kind of fake-it-'til-you-make-it that every start-up dabbled in. The important thing was to keep revenue pouring into buyers' accounts, even if it wasn't coming from the leases DC Solar pitched as the bedrock of its business. Also important was pretending that the revenue *was* coming from those leases and that big companies like T-Mobile and Disney couldn't get enough of the Solar Eclipse.

"Things are exploding here at DC Solar," Carpoff started to say at company-wide meetings. "We're going through the stratosphere."

Money didn't so much change Jeff Carpoff as give him the means to more fully be himself. He credited the American dream. "We are the land of the free," he told his employees. "We can do anything."

When he pulled into work in the morning, a hard-rock version of "The Star-Spangled Banner" thundered from the speakers of his red pickup truck. He later installed a massive, six-paneled photograph of the American flag on his factory walls and claimed that his family said the Pledge of Allegiance, in lieu of grace, at holiday meals.

On a trip to Las Vegas, Carpoff ordered a custom motorcycle with an "America theme" paint job. "On the tanks I want, like, the Statue of Liberty holding a flag and the flag blowing in the wind," Carpoff told the shop's owner, in an exchange captured in a 2012 episode of the reality-TV show *Counting Cars*. "I want the Constitution on the back fender."

"We the People!" he proclaimed.

When the shop owner showed him the finished bike at the end of the episode, Carpoff, all smiles and high fives, was beside himself. "It just looks—how do I say this?—'politically correct,'" he said, sending everyone there into hysterics.

If talking about cars and motorcycles came easy to Carpoff, talking about climate change did not. He often wore a pained expression as his marketing staff asked him to recite scripted lines for promotional videos.

"'We strive for a healthier planet … by offering unique solar products that—' Fuck!" Carpoff says in one of many fumbled takes. "I can't remember. What the son of a bitch!" A shot of tequila sometimes helped.

John Miranda, a film and TV producer, joined the company as communications director because he believed in its potential to fight global warming. He began having doubts on his first day at headquarters. He'd driven into the lot to find one of Carpoff's new muscle cars parked in a handicapped space, with a DC Solar employee changing the oil.

Carpoff, Miranda learned, was in fact a collector of vintage gas-guzzlers. His showpieces included a Dodge Charger painted like *The Dukes of Hazzard*'s General Lee and a 1978 Trans Am once owned by Burt Reynolds, a replica of the one the actor had driven in *Smokey and the Bandit*.

No less perplexing was Carpoff's choice of NASCAR as his main marketing partner. DC Solar spent millions sponsoring the Xfinity race series and drivers like Ross Chastain and Kyle Larson, with DC Solar's logo splashed across cars, tracks, and racing suits. Not only was NASCAR one of the world's most polluting sports, but the politics of its fans rarely aligned with those of the green businesses that might actually rent a solar generator. When Miranda tagged NASCAR in a DC Solar Facebook post, one of the first replies was "Solar is for fags."

If employees asked questions, Paulette, a small but commanding woman, had a stock retort: *Stay in your lane.* She had grown irritable and hypervigilant, liable to explode at the least provocation.

Jeff, meanwhile, looked like he was having an enormous amount of fun. A sign he'd make for his office parking space bore the letters JMFC. It was the acronym for the nickname he'd given himself: Jeff "Mother Fuckin'" Carpoff. (He extended the honorific to Paulette and their kids, Lauren and Matt, whose parking spaces were marked PMFC, LMFC, and MMFC.)

It was hard to fault his confidence. In less than three years, he'd sold nearly 1,200 generators, for $174 million. Yet if you stopped by the company's small headquarters—near a water-treatment

The plan had many hallmarks of a classic Ponzi scheme, but with a twist: The American taxpayer would subsidize the scam.

plant in Concord, California—you might never guess at the torrents of money sloshing through its accounts.

Forrest Milder seemed taken aback by how fast the IRS had moved. "An audit from the IRS?" the tax lawyer wrote to Carpoff in July 2013 after learning that the Sherwin-Williams deal was under review. "Is this even old enough to be audited?"

As Milder worked to fend off an apparently deepening IRS investigation, Carpoff faced a more immediate threat. In February 2014, an alarming email had arrived from James Howard Jr., an investment executive who was helping Valley National Bank purchase $76.8 million worth of Carpoff's generators.

Carpoff had told Howard that 80 to 90 percent of DC Solar's generators were rented out. But Howard was demanding proof, and company executives knew they couldn't provide it. A list of actual leases would reveal a minuscule 5 percent leasing rate, which would imperil the Valley National Bank deals and expose the Ponzi scheme.

A DC Solar lawyer—who court documents indicate is Ari Lauer—deflected by claiming that most lease information was confidential. But Howard refused to be put off. So Ronald Roach, the DC Solar accountant, leaned on a colleague named Rob Karmann.

Karmann was a former high-school classmate of Roach's who struggled with alcohol abuse and had been fired from several jobs before calling Roach in search of work. This call led, however implausibly, to a job at DC Solar, first as controller, then as chief financial officer. Over four years, Karmann's salary, with bonuses, would grow from $135,000 to $475,000, plus a company car and a golf membership.

Enjoying a sense of what an associate called "respectability" for the first time in his life, Karmann obligingly produced fictitious reports of who was leasing the units and for how much. ("This guy gets his shit done" was how Carpoff toasted him at one holiday party.) Karmann's newfound social status was "probably the biggest reason … I was so willing to go along with stuff I should have walked away from," he told me this past September, by phone from federal prison.

(Valley National Bank and Progressive Insurance did not respond to requests for comment. A U.S. Bank spokesperson told me, "While we conduct due diligence and review the business plans of companies we invest in, it's not possible to know how individuals operating these companies will act in future periods." Messages left for Gary Knapp, the financial modeler—and his son Nicholas Knapp, who would become one of DC Solar's most prolific outside brokers—were not returned.)

Carpoff needed each new deal to be bigger than the last. He had no other way to cover the mushrooming "lease" payments (he told a colleague they were "killing" him, according to court documents), or the high-flying lifestyle that advertised his success. But investors were no longer taking it on faith that leases existed. Carpoff needed real—or at least real-looking—leases to show around, ideally from big-name brands.

Around September 2015, Carpoff approached his vice president of operations, Ryan Guidry, a Louisianan who'd had a long career as a bartender before marketing what an associate said were subprime loans in the lead-up to the 2008 mortgage crisis. Could Guidry find someone to sign a fake T-Mobile lease? Carpoff asked. A phony contract that committed "T-Mobile" to leasing 1,000 generators for at least a decade, at $13 million a year?

Carpoff said he'd pay $1 million to Guidry and $1 million more to whoever signed as "T-Mobile."

Guidry thought of Alan Hansen, a local T-Mobile employee who had powered some San Francisco cell towers with rented Solar Eclipses during blackouts. Guidry invited Hansen to a bar, bought him a couple of beers, and put the forged lease in front of him, Hansen told me. (Neither Guidry nor his representatives responded to requests for comment.)

Hansen, a middle-aged Navy veteran frustrated by his failure to advance at T-Mobile, accepted the $1 million and signed the contract, deliberately not reading it. Carpoff then hired Hansen at a salary 60 percent higher than what he'd made at T-Mobile and gave him a do-nothing job. Around DC Solar's offices, Hansen carried himself with an air of dignity and spoke of once wanting to be a minister.

The following year, at the NASCAR season opener known as Speedweeks, Carpoff befriended Frank Kelleher, the managing director of International Speedway Corporation (ISC), which ran the Daytona International Speedway and other major NASCAR tracks.

Within months, ISC signed contracts to lease 1,500 generators for 10 years, at a cost of $150 million, according to court

filings. But the contracts—marked "NON-CANCELLABLE" and "UNCONDITIONAL"—had an undisclosed addendum that gave DC Solar and ISC multiple outs. (NASCAR, which acquired ISC in 2019, did not respond to requests for comment.) Over about two years, ISC would pay DC Solar $8.5 million for its leases—and get $15 million in "sponsorship payments" from DC Solar. In an internal email from 2017, ISC's CFO called it "a mutually beneficial relationship."

The "T-Mobile" and ISC leases came together as DC Solar courted a whale. The insurance company Geico was owned by Berkshire Hathaway. Warren Buffett's conglomerate was a seasoned user of tax credits and the fourth-largest company on the *Fortune* 500.

Buffett was bullish on solar. "If somebody walks in with a solar project tomorrow and it takes a billion dollars or it takes $3 billion, we're ready to do it," he would later say, at a 2017 shareholders' meeting. "And the more the better."

But DC Solar spooked Geico two weeks before the deal was to close, by asking for faster payments—supposedly to fix some supply-chain snag. Geico's CFO, Mike Campbell, found the last-minute upsell "very troubling." "It makes me wonder about their financial backing … and whether they can handle the volume of deals they are trying to put together," Campbell wrote to a subordinate. "If there's a way out of the deal, take it."

DC Solar raced to pacify Campbell. The deal was salvaged. In four transactions over three years, Geico would buy 7,980 generators for nearly $1.2 billion, saving the company some $377 million in taxes. (A lawyer for Geico declined to say whether Buffett had played any role in the deal. A Berkshire spokesperson didn't respond to messages.)

Flush with Geico's money, DC Solar moved its headquarters, in the summer of 2016, from a back road in Concord to a modern hilltop facility 10 miles north, in Benicia, overlooking the rush of commuters on I-680.

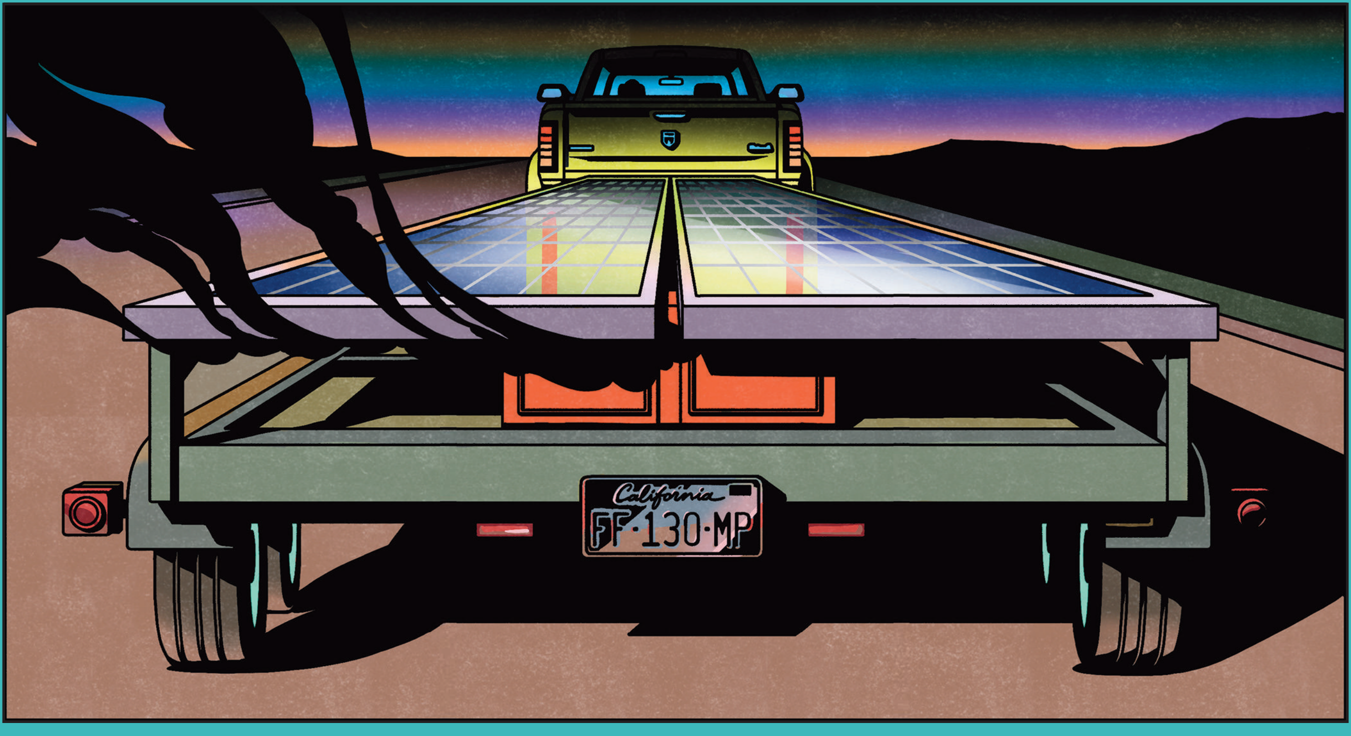
Inspired by the shop floors at Chip Ganassi Racing, a prestigious racing organization whose NASCAR drivers DC Solar sponsored, Carpoff bought a Zamboni to keep his factory floor gleaming.

"When … the bankers come in," Carpoff explained to a visitor, in a conversation captured by Steve Beal, DC Solar's videographer, "they see this, and it's automatically a great first impression."

Impressions mattered more than ever, because within months of the move, DC Solar had all but stopped manufacturing Solar Eclipses—even as it sold record numbers of the devices. If you could fool smart businesspeople with fake leases, how much harder could it be to sell them fake generators? The very thing that had wowed early investors—the generators' portability—made their absence from any particular location easy to explain away. "Here one day, there the next" had basically been the sales pitch.

To prove that the generators were somewhere, DC Solar had begun sending buyers "commissioning reports," with a DMV-registered vehicle identification number and 20-point physical inspection for each unit. The "independent engineer" who produced these reports was not independent and not an engineer. Joseph Bayliss was a classmate of Carpoff's from high-school auto shop, another "mope"—as an associate called him—with an inflated job title. "Never says no," Carpoff said of Bayliss, in a tribute at a holiday party.

Carpoff employed a different tactic with buyers who insisted on counting their generators in person at DC Solar's warehouses. He and his workers used putty knives, acetone, and mineral spirits



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to remove VIN stickers from generators belonging to earlier buyers, then applied, to those same units, the VINs of whatever buyer happened to be visiting. To dupe buyers who wanted real-time data on their units' whereabouts, workers buried GPS transponders in out-of-the-way locations, minus the generators they were billed as being attached to.

Inspectors willing to drive hours to see their Solar Eclipses in the field were the hardest to misdirect. Carpoff had employees work overnight, delivering generators in the nick of time, to make it look like they'd been there all along.

Of the more than 17,000 generators sold from 2011 to 2018, only about 6,000 would be found to exist.

If you could fool smart businesspeople with fake leases, how much harder could it be to sell them fake generators?

By 2016, the IRS had begun to catch on. The agency had examined DC Solar's first two deals: the one with Sherwin-Williams, and another with a specially formed company called Aaron Burr LLC, an apparent allusion to the man who killed Alexander Hamilton, the first Treasury secretary, in a duel.

IRS investigators concluded that the fair market value of each Solar Eclipse—if manufactured in the quantities claimed—was, with a reasonable markup, about $13,000. That was less than one-tenth of the $150,000 that DC Solar charged buyers. And that meant that the $45,000 buyers saved on their taxes for each generator was more than 300 percent of its value, instead of the 30 percent federal law allowed. It also meant that even if DC Solar never earned a cent from leases, buyers' 30 percent down covered all the manufacturing costs, thrice over.

In addition, the IRS found, Sherwin-Williams and Aaron Burr were so insulated from risk that they were ineligible for most or all of the tax credits—and subject to penalties. DC Solar's transaction structure, IRS investigators alleged, was a "sham" involving "a mere circular movement of money … to prop up a vastly overstated purchase price in order to impermissibly maximize the energy credit."(In a statement to *The Atlantic*, Sherwin-Williams said that it relied, for due diligence, on "purported experts" in renewable-energy tax credits, and cautioned against "blaming the victims rather than the professionals who enabled this fraud." Aaron Burr LLC did not respond to requests for comment.)

It was a damning allegation, but audit reports are confidential, leaving other investors in the dark.

In June 2016, around the time the IRS sent its findings to DC Solar, Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx chose the company as a partner in the Obama administration's Smart City Challenge, which pressed cities to adopt climate-friendly technology. The selection put DC Solar in the company of far better-known partners, including Amazon Web Services, Alphabet's Sidewalk Labs, and Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen's Vulcan Inc., all of which promised to supply the winning city with technology and support.

When the Obama administration chose Columbus, Ohio, as its winning Smart City, the fact sheet citing DC Solar's pledge—of $1.5 million in solar gear—came straight from the White House.

"We are now partners of the United States," Dan Briggs, an executive with DC Solar's charitable arm, who'd once run for a Nevada-state-assembly seat, boasted in an interview for a company holiday video. "We are recognized by the top people in government as being a go-to operator to help them get things done.

"Where this takes us in the future," Briggs added, shaking his head, "is limitless."

Back home in Martinez, the mayor and city council celebrated the Carpoffs as hometown heroes. The couple sponsored a holiday ice rink, donated $100,000 to the police, and bought the city a professional independent-league baseball team, the Martinez Clippers.

But they spent much more on themselves: cars; couture; homes in Cabo San Lucas and Las Vegas; a luxury box at the Raiders' new NFL stadium; extravagant Christmas parties at San Francisco's Fairmont Hotel, where DC Solar's workers—just 100 or so at the company's peak—were treated to private performances by the pop band Sugar Ray, the rapper Pitbull, and the country duo Big & Rich.

Hardly a day went by when Carpoff wasn't cooking up a new business idea, whether it was starting a bottled-water brand, producing a Sasquatch movie, or supplying light towers for President Donald Trump's border wall, according to a senior employee, who called his boss "Willy Wonka." Carpoff was already leasing warehouses to marijuana growers, one of whom was paying rent in $250,000 cash installments, he told associates.

At DC Solar's 2017 holiday party, an executive named Mark Hughes lionized Carpoff as an epoch-making inventor.

"The Thomas Edison of the West Coast," Hughes said from the ballroom stage.

When Carpoff got to the lectern, he assessed himself differently. "I'm kind of entrepreneur," he joked. "More *manure* than *entre*."

To judge by the weak laughter, few in the audience found it funny. It cut too close, perhaps, to what many of them already suspected. The record-breaking sales in 2017—the more than 5,100 generators, for more than $748 million? It baffled the workers who knew how few were being built. "How is the company surviving?" Jason Rieger, a technician, recalled wondering. Accounting employees didn't know what to think when Carpoff swaggered through the office with shopping bags stuffed with cash.

The Carpoffs had by then installed dozens of surveillance cameras around the offices and shop floor. Paulette scrutinized the feeds, which played on a large TV screen in her office, and barred workers from going alone into the file room, where contracts, invoices, and VIN registrations were stored. She interrogated an employee who made frequent bathroom trips and fired another for cc'ing a co-worker's personal email rather than his company address. Two large dogs, Belgian Malinois named Diesel and Fou—the latter trained to attack—followed her everywhere. A plaque on her desk, one employee recalled, said I'LL BE NICER IF YOU'LL BE SMARTER.

The fear Paulette inspired gave Jeff the slack to play the boss you felt lucky to have. At the end of all-hands meetings, he would pull hundreds of dollars from his pocket and give it to whichever employee best guessed its sum.

But the acts of generosity had started to feel performative. The Carpoffs had millions of dollars for over-the-top holiday parties but resisted better medical benefits for workers. "We all bit that fucking hook," Bobby Amato, Paulette's brother, told me, still bitter about Carpoff's failures to credit him for co-inventing the generator. "[Jeff] said, 'One day, we're all going to be rich.' I said, 'I don't see nobody being rich here but you.'"

Toughest to manipulate were the people who needed neither money nor approval: the professional dealmakers and investors who'd learned things about DC Solar that could destroy the company. On at least three such people, sources told me, Carpoff tried intimidation—summoning a burly Polish émigré, a reputed loan shark whom Carpoff alternately described as an experienced killer, a prison-camp survivor, and a mafioso.

An early investor who'd grown suspicious of Carpoff cut off all contact after a couple of encounters with the Pole, who the investor believes put a tracking device on his truck. "When I saw his 'Polish Mafia' come in, that was it," the investor told me.

Whether the Polish man was a true thug or a wannabe is unclear. But Carpoff was an illusionist: It mattered less whether people were in actual danger—or on the brink of great wealth—than that they believed themselves to be.

At about 8 o'clock one weeknight around February 2018, Mimi Morales, who served as both cleaning lady and limo driver for the Carpoffs, noticed something amiss while vacuuming the offices: An employee named Sebastian Jano had used a back entrance and was coolly packing up his desk.

Jano, a solar-financing expert with law and business degrees from Villanova, was a new recruit. Carpoff had hired him the year before to solicit deals.

Morales asked Jano where he was going.

Jano replied that he'd gotten an offer from another company.

"He acted totally normal," Morales told me. "No big deal. 'Just getting my stuff.'"

DC Solar's headquarters were already a paranoid place. But after Jano's departure, workers noticed more paper-shredding and more closed-door meetings, and were no longer allowed to open mail.

The Carpoffs had secretly moved millions of dollars to offshore accounts in the Bahamas and the Cook Islands. In August, they bought a $5 million house in the Caribbean nation of St. Kitts and Nevis and applied for a government program there that supplies passports and citizenship to buyers of luxury homes.

Beal, the videographer, was putting together a celebratory film for the company's 2018 Christmas party when he stopped by Carpoff's office that fall. On the desk was what Beal described to me as a "holy-shit amount of money": cliffs of cash so tall that people sitting on opposite sides wouldn't have been able to see each other.

In early December, the Carpoffs told their office manager, Brian Strickland, that they were going on an unplanned vacation. They needed him to take photos for new passports, which someone was helping fast-track.

"They seemed in a rush," Strickland told me. "The way they said it was 'We have this guy who's going to do it for us super quick.'"

On Tuesday, December 18, 2018, some 175 federal agents, supervised by the FBI's Sacramento office, began streaming in unmarked cars toward Benicia and Martinez. Joining the bureau were agents with IRS Criminal Investigation and the U.S. Marshals Service.

At about 9:30 a.m., the agents swarmed DC Solar headquarters, while a SWAT team broke down the front door of the Carpoffs' hillside home. Agents found nearly $1.7 million in cash in Carpoff's office safe.

The agents pressed employees for the location of his cars. They were pointed down the street, to a trio of pristinely maintained warehouses. Inside was a museum-like collection that favored the American muscle car but spanned almost the entire history of the automobile, from a 1926 Ford Model T to a 2014 Tesla Model S—nearly 150 cars in all, beautiful to look at, but so battery-dead that U.S. Marshals couldn't get many of them to start.

While the raids were under way, Carpoff called the office to ask if his and Paulette's passports were still on his desk. Told no—agents had seized them—Carpoff said, "Oh fuck" and hung up.

It's hard to know why he didn't flee earlier. He had told a colleague that he was scared of flying over oceans. But another fear may have been stronger: Running would destroy the fantasy that had turned him from local screwup into local hotshot. Just three days before the raids, he was wearing black sequins and





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partying with Pitbull at the DC Solar holiday party, as if being Jeff "Mother Fuckin'" Carpoff for one more night trumped the grubby unknowns of a lifetime on the run.

Whether or not Carpoff knew it, his fantasy had begun to unravel about 10 months earlier, when the Securities and Exchange Commission received a whistleblower report from an employee who'd recently resigned. Court documents strongly suggest—and multiple sources confirmed—that the employee was Sebastian Jano, who'd startled the cleaning lady the night he left. (Jano did not respond to requests for comment.) According to court filings, the employee discovered the circular payments and confronted Carpoff and Lauer, DC Solar's general counsel. Unmoved by Lauer's alleged claim that there was a "method to the madness," the employee quit. The SEC alerted the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of California, in Sacramento, which called in the FBI.

As agents seized cars and other assets that December day, Carpoff arranged for a Louis Vuitton bag stuffed with a men's Cartier watch and as much as $640,000 in cash to be handed off—at a Las Vegas bar called Timbers—to a friend who'd trained the Carpoffs' Belgian Malinois, the friend alleged in a lawsuit. (Carpoff had previously assured confidantes that he'd planned for contingencies. "He said, 'I still have $500,000 worth of meth buried in a cemetery in Martinez,'" Morales told me. "He said, 'That's my emergency parachute.'")

The next night, or the one after, Carpoff asked Bayliss—the high-school classmate who'd signed the fake commissioning reports—to meet in the parking lot of a Martinez Burger King. Carpoff told him to get a burner phone, travel to a Las Vegas warehouse, and trash the hundreds of fraudulent VIN stickers the company stored there. Bayliss, toasted as the guy who "never says no," did as he was told.

As federal agents closed in, Carpoff told Bayliss to keep cool. If no one talked, Carpoff said, according to Bayliss, the government would have nothing to go on. But Bayliss sensed that the feds weren't "that stupid," according to an IRS memo of his interviews with investigators. And he finally said no. His meetings with federal agents and assistant U.S. attorneys in July 2019, and his agreement to plead guilty, all but gave the government its other targets. Over the next few months, prosecutors secured guilty pleas and cooperation from Roach, DC Solar's accountant; Karmann, the CFO; and Guidry, the VP of operations. Hansen, who was paid $1 million for signing the fake T-Mobile lease, would admit his guilt a little later. All have been sentenced to prison, or are expected to be by the end of this year. (This past September, the SEC filed a civil lawsuit charging Lauer, DC Solar's general counsel, with securities fraud. Lauer has filed a motion to dismiss, saying he violated no laws.)

The Carpoffs were cornered. Stripped of wealth—and of their lieutenants' loyalty—they pleaded guilty on January 24, 2020: Carpoff to money laundering and conspiracy to commit wire fraud, Paulette to money laundering and conspiracy to commit an offense against the United States. (The Carpoffs declined multiple interview requests for this story.)

Over eight years, in at least 34 deals, DC Solar had defrauded more than a

dozen corporate customers out of almost $1 billion. Because those corporations had used the investment tax credit to deduct roughly that entire sum from their taxes, DC Solar had effectively robbed the American people. The corporations are expected to return their ill-gotten tax breaks to the U.S. Treasury. Most of them joined a 2019 lawsuit accusing more than a dozen of DC Solar's legal and financial advisers—including Nixon Peabody and Milder—of negligence, malpractice, and fraud.

The lawyer for Milder and Nixon Peabody wrote to me that neither Milder nor the firm were aware of or complicit in any criminal fraud. Nixon Peabody, the lawyer said, served solely as tax counsel, providing opinions based on "an assumed set of facts" that were only later exposed as false or fraudulent. The lawyer added that the investors had access to at least as much information about the company's performance. Though they deny any wrongdoing, Milder and Nixon Peabody agreed last year to pay the plaintiffs what court filings describe as a "substantial" undisclosed sum, a settlement larger than those paid, to date, by any of DC Solar's other advisers.

It's hard to think of another 10-figure fraud that rooked so many banks, insurance companies, and other sophisticated financiers.

Carpoff's $1 billion Ponzi scheme was smaller, in dollars, than Bernie Madoff's (about $19 billion) or R. Allen Stanford's (about $7 billion). But it was nearly twice the size of the 21st century's best-known green-energy scandal: the one involving Solyndra, the politically connected solar-panel company, based just 45 miles south of Martinez, that got a $535 million federal loan guarantee in 2009, only to go bankrupt two years later. It's hard to think of another 10-figure fraud—in any sector—that rooked so many banks, insurance companies, and other sophisticated financiers. It's harder still to conjure a billion-dollar swindle in which some of the nation's top financial companies were outmaneuvered on their own turf by a high-school-educated, small-town mechanic.

Jeff Carpoff is serving his time in a medium-security correctional institution in Victorville, in a sun-scorched patch of California's High Desert.

At his sentencing, on November 9, 2021, in a federal courthouse in Sacramento, he apologized to the government, investors, and his family. But his lawyer, Malcolm Segal, said that other people, who had not been charged, shared responsibility: The professional advisers who gave the deals the sheen of legitimacy. The brokers who got six-figure commissions for bringing buyers to the table. The buyers themselves, who vetted the transactions with teams of experts yet returned to DC Solar for one multimillion-dollar deal after the next.

When the judge, John Mendez, asked Carpoff if he had anything to add, Carpoff said, "Yeah."

He claimed that he'd never had the brains for a tax-credit deal. He'd trusted the wrong people. He would have quit long ago had buyers cared about anything but their tax credits. "The bigger the deal, the easier they were to close," Carpoff said. "It was the most bizarre thing."

Then he told the judge that in 2018—the year of the FBI raid—he'd been on the cusp of finally setting things right. DC Solar had an offer for 30 leases from a sports-marketing company. It had a signed contract to provide 10,000 car chargers to the U.S. Department of Transportation for parking lots and schools across the country. (A DOT spokesperson told me there was never any such contract.)

When Carpoff started talking about new marketing plans for solar generators with video screens and facial-recognition software, Judge Mendez cut him off. "You were selling air," the judge said. He sentenced Carpoff to 30 years in prison. Seven months later, Paulette, deemed less culpable, would be sentenced to 11 years and three months.

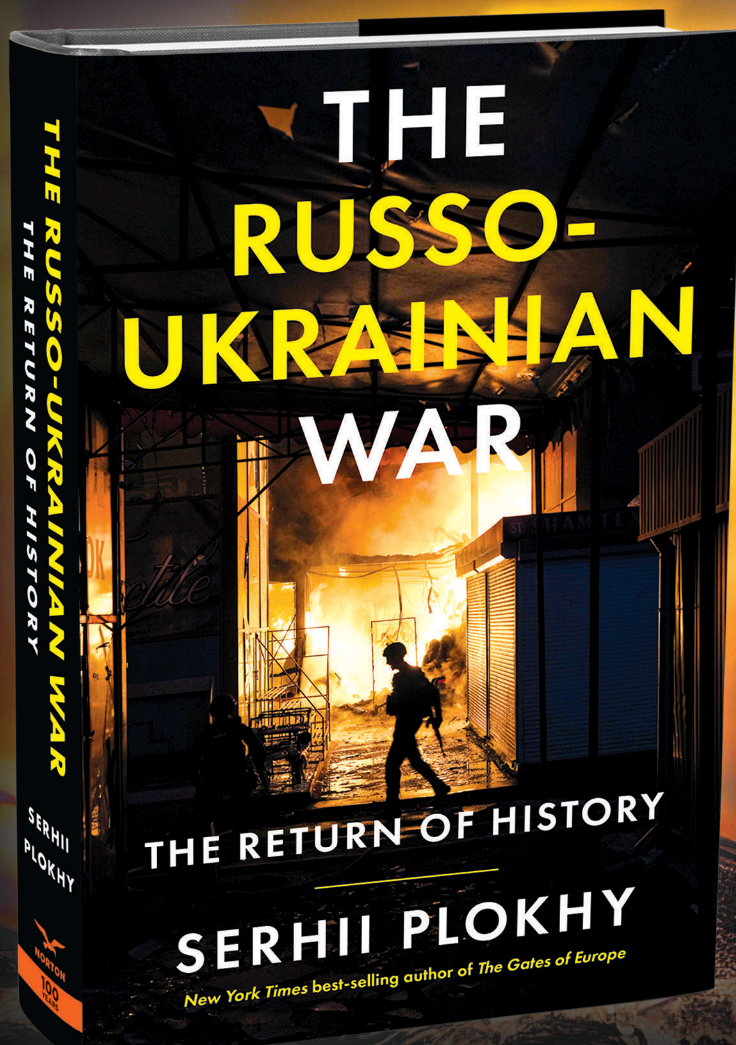
At a DC Solar holiday party a few years earlier, after a little tequila, Carpoff gleefully told the story of one of his first encounters with the law. He was 15 and had persuaded his high-school auto-shop teacher to sell him a 1970 Chevelle—even though Carpoff had no license, no insurance, and no registration. He'd driven it for less than a day when a highway patrolman gave him a ticket and ordered him to walk home.

Three decades later, the story still resonated enough for him to want to share it with a banquet hall full of investors and employees. During that glorious ride, in that exhilarating stretch before anyone realized how many laws he was breaking, "I said, 'Man, I got away with this,'" he reminisced. "I'm like, 'Man, look at me.'" *A*

Ariel Sabar is a winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award and the author of Veritas: A Harvard Professor, a Con Man and the Gospel of Jesus's Wife.

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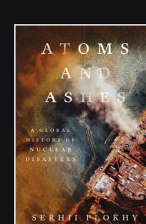


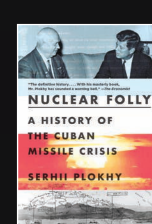
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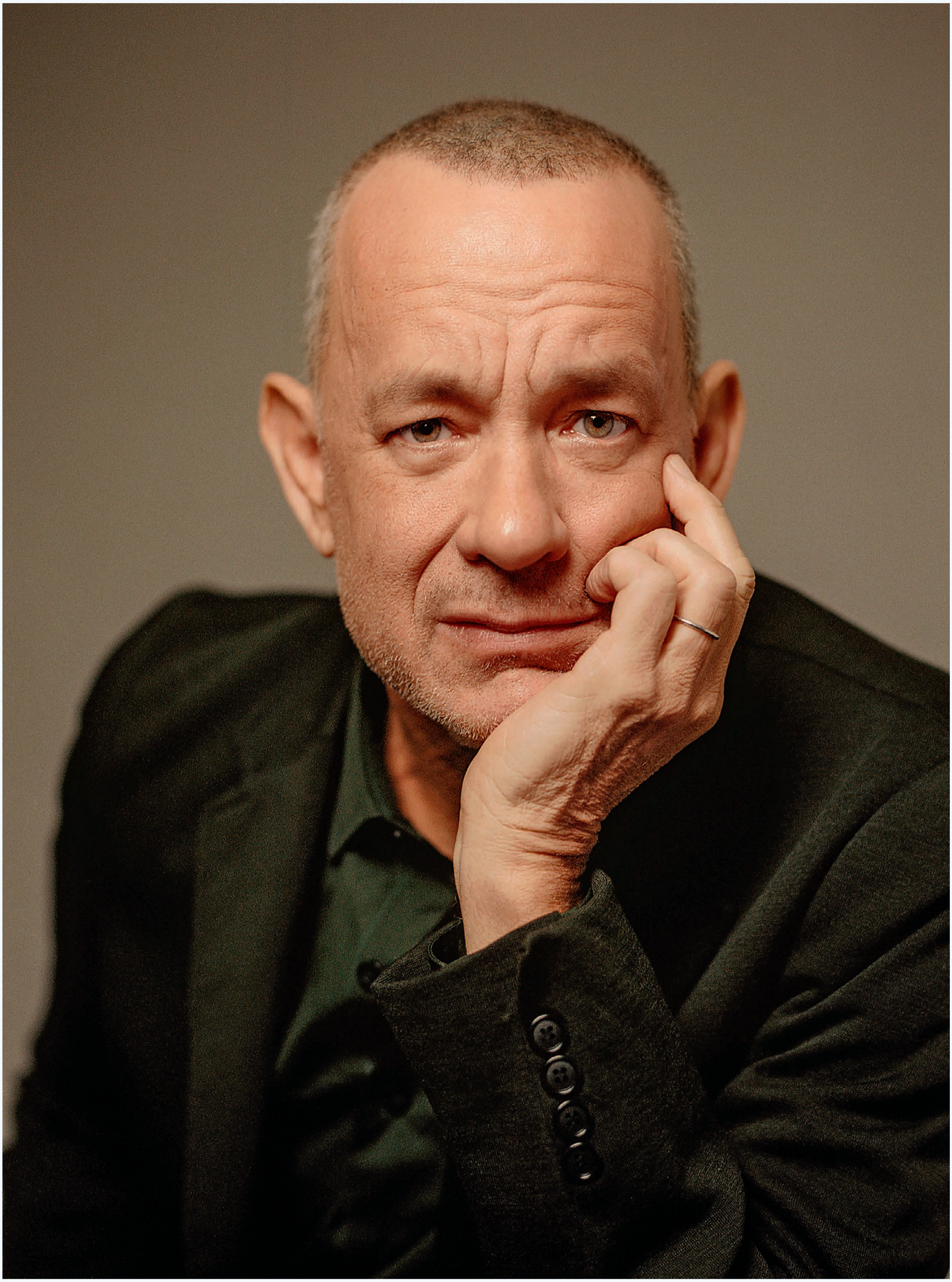
REFLECTS ON HOW HE GOT HERE,

AND THE OTHER LIVES HE

MIGHT HAVE LIVED INSTEAD.

THE MAKING OF TOM HANKS

BY CHRIS HEATH



Photograph by Erik Carter

THERE IS A PARTICULAR CIRCUMSTANCE DEEP IN TOM HANKS'S PAST THAT he thinks may explain something significant about the person he is now. One that suggests how, before all of this—before everything he would achieve and come to represent in the world, before he had even begun to work out what talents he might have and how he might best use them—he was already well on the way to becoming who he would be.

As a child, several times a year, Hanks would take a long journey on a Greyhound bus, heading to and from the small Northern California town of Red Bluff. He was often alone, and he always sat by the window. In Red Bluff, Hanks would stay with his mother, Janet; after his parents' marriage ruptured when he was 5, he never lived with her, but on holidays he'd visit. And so, from when he was 8 until he was 17, four or so hours each way, he'd take this ride.

Those journeys, they released something within him. Sometimes he read a little, maybe a comic, maybe a book, but mostly he'd stare out into the passing world. He'd watch the broken sine wave of the telephone lines, looping on and on and on for miles, then veering away, then rejoining the bus's path. He'd see a barn, wonder what was on the other side. A house would flash by; he'd imagine who lived in it. Some figures standing outside: What were they doing? A plane up in the clear sky: All those people, where were they going and what were they thinking? The couple in that car as the Greyhound passed, the guy by himself in the truck, that station wagon loaded up with kids in the back, that locomotive on the train tracks …

In his mind, all of these questions and thoughts would mix with what was already sloshing around—the movies he'd seen, the stuff he liked to read about space exploration. Sometimes it would coalesce into a narrative. He'd see himself flying a jet, being an explorer, winning the day, gaining revenge, getting into a fistfight. Sometimes it would just flow and flow, as the day's light faded and his destination edged nearer. A boy by a window, imagining what was and what could be.

HALF A CENTURY LATER, Tom Hanks meets me in the lobby of Claridge's hotel in London, clutching the rectangular stick of a negative COVID test in one hand. When he and his wife, Rita Wilson, contracted COVID in the anxious early days of the pandemic, it made Hanks, in his words, "the celebrity canary in the coal mine." Back then, his infection seemed disproportionately unsettling. If he describes being a little taken aback by the attention it drew—"When your name appears in a chyron on CNN as breaking news: 'Oh, I guess we're a bigger part of the zeitgeist than we anticipated'"—well, perhaps he is not as invested as the wider culture is in the idea of Tom Hanks as some kind of cherished symbol, benignly treasured in a way few public figures are. "An avatar," as *The New York Times* put it last year, "of American goodness."

Looking back, we might imagine that this idea of Hanks built up gradually, emerging through the years as he accrued status and dignity. Not really. Here's a representative sample of ways he was already described in the 1980s: "a funny and vulnerable Everyman," "an affable soul without a visible speck of vanity in his makeup," "more like the nice neighbor next door than a movie star," "regular guy as star," "the everyguy," "an unshakable nice-guy image." By 1988, he was delivering a *Saturday Night Live* monologue that morphed into an extended skit satirizing the cliché of how relentlessly nice he is. How he is seen now is pretty much how he has been seen for a very long time.

Hanks, who is 66, appears lithe and sprightly, almost as though he has too much energy for such a slip of a body. He is in town to shoot a movie, Robert Zemeckis's adaptation of Richard McGuire's *Here*, a graphic novel in which every frame takes place in a single living room in a house. This will be the fifth collaboration between Zemeckis and Hanks, an irregular series that began with *Forrest Gump* and *Cast Away*. But the occasion for our talk is something more immediate: the publication of Hanks's first novel.

He's keen to talk about that, and plenty else besides. Hanks is at his most animated when the words coming out of his mouth are something along the lines of "I just learned recently why there's so many covered bridges in America. You know why there's so many covered bridges in America?" And he's off. A while after we sit down, he declares, "I'm not on any schedule," and more than four hours of conversation pass before he suggests that perhaps he should spend some time with his family.

Whenever Hanks walks around New York City, he says, there are certain kinds of things he finds himself curious about. "Like, you know the guys that are running the soda stands?" he says. "I always want to ask, 'Dude, you got to go to the bathroom at some point. How do you do it? Where do you do it?' I'm literally interested in: How do you do your job? What time do you show up at work? When do you have to start loading this stuff? Who drives you here and drops you off? How long have you been doing it?"

What do you think it is, I ask him, that your brain wants to understand?

"You know, I've never had any real other job than being an actor," he tells me. "I mean, I was a bellman on weekends; I washed dishes for a while." And so, he says, he's always wondered: If he weren't making



Hanks, around age 10

ALAMY

movies, what might he be doing instead? "What skills do I have? What service could I render? And I always think, *What if* that *was it? What if I was the guy who did* that?"

A cab driver, for instance. "I would want to be the most entertaining, fabulous cab driver on the planet Earth. I'd want to be the tour guide and everything." This reminds him of the way his late friend Nora Ephron once summed him up. "She said something that was really true: I would have made the greatest park ranger in the history of the national parks. I would have loved the uniform. I would have run the campfire talks. I would have known the history of it all, and I would have weaved the perfect story ... I would have loved going to work."

If that's all sounding just a little too tidy and wholesome, this might be a good moment to point out that one of the fascinations of a Tom Hanks story is that it's sometimes rather different than you might expect a Tom Hanks story to be. Later, he expands on his spell as a hotel bellman (at the Hilton Oakland Airport when he was a teenager), a story offered not as early-life biography but as an illustrative tale about effective problem-solving. "I had a guy who I checked into a room," Hanks says, "and he had pictures in his wallet, and he showed me a picture. He said, 'Does anything like this go on in this hotel?' And it was a guy giving another guy a blow job. This guy was saying, 'You want to come up later and give me a blow job? I'll pay you.' And I said, 'No, actually, I don't think anything like that does.' I solved the problem, gave the guy an honest answer, and left him to his own."

And then he's off again, spelling out the career trajectory that a young bellman good at fixing problems might have had ahead of him: next step, working at the front desk; then sales; then management, until "next thing you know, you're running the International Garden Suites in Coral Gables, Florida"; then, further down the road, "move to the Bahamas." Spinning one more story about one more life he might have lived if he hadn't turned out to be Tom Hanks instead.

HANKS'S PUBLIC IMAGE is so entrenched that it can eclipse who he really is, and the far scrappier tale of how he came to be. As a boy, Hanks had a disorderly home life. One go-to quip in old interviews was that his parents, who both divorced multiple times, "pioneered the marriage-dissolution laws for the state of California." He found some kind of solace, and maybe latent possibility, in the stories that filled his head on those long bus journeys to and from Red Bluff. "I was the third kid," he says. "I was just like a leaf blowing in the wind. No one did anything because I wanted it. I wasn't in control of nothing. Somebody else was always telling us what to do." Focus and ambition came gradually. He was well into his high-school years before he discovered drama class and with it one possible shape of a life ahead.

At first, a very modest one. Not long after college, Hanks took his father, Amos "Bud" Hanks, who worked as a restaurant cook, to a performance of Tom Stoppard's *Travesties* staged by a repertory company that the younger Hanks admired. "I said, 'I want to show you the thing that I'm aiming for' ... And when it was done, I said, 'If I can work at a place like this in a few years, this is the apex of it all for me—to be in something this good, in a repertory company, that means I'd really be a true artist and an actor.'"

Hanks never had that repertory-theater career. Instead, after some struggling and a two-season sitcom, *Bosom Buddies*, he ascended into movie stardom. Maybe only two of his early films, *Splash* and *Big*, were truly memorable or impressive, but even the misfires didn't seem to break his momentum or dent the sense that Hanks's face fit. Notably, the one person who felt that something was awry was Hanks. He met with his people, and told them that he wasn't happy with the kinds of stories he was telling.

Hanks felt typecast, forever some fantastical, hapless man-boy looking for love. He wanted to play adults who were complicated, who understood the bitterness of compromise. If need be, he'd wait until the right roles came along or until he could proactively nudge them into existence. The six movies he released from 1992 to 1995, his imperial phase, may have satisfied this requirement in very different ways, but every one of them—*A League of Their Own*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, *Philadelphia*, *Forrest Gump*, *Apollo 13*, and *Toy Story*—was a critical and commercial triumph; for *Philadelphia* and *Forrest Gump*, he won back-to-back Best Actor Academy Awards. (Steve Martin once joked that Hanks "took a shortcut to becoming a movie star—he only made hits.")

One itch palliated, others emerged. As an antidote to the seemingly endless and repetitive promotional demands of *Forrest Gump*, Hanks began to write a screenplay: a sweet tale of a one-hit-wonder band in the '60s, *That Thing You Do!*, which he would direct and star in as well. He also started a production company in 1998, and since then he has spent much of his time developing projects, most distinctively prestige-TV series on subjects that interested him: the history of space exploration, the birth of America, World War II. But the stream of movies with Tom Hanks on the marquee has never sputtered. Just in the past two years, he's been a stranded postapocalyptic survivor who builds a robot for company (*Finch*), a suicidal misanthrope who finds his better self in modern-day Pittsburgh suburbia (*A Man Called Otto*), a grieving old-world woodcarver (*Pinocchio*), Elvis Presley's duplicitous manager (*Elvis*). This June, he appears in Wes Anderson's *Asteroid City*.

WHAT I HAVE just related is a condensed version of Tom Hanks's rise, as it is generally understood. But there is a document—an early example, in fact, of Hanks's writing—that allows for the possibility that far earlier, when he was still in school, a different side of Hanks already existed, one that was much more gung-ho about this movie-star world and the place he might find in it.

George Roy Hill was the director of such films as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *The Sting*. Hill died in 2002, but many of his papers are in the collection at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Among them is a two-page, handwritten letter in blue ink from a teenage schoolboy, who, as the letter explains, is friends with two of Hill's nephews and his niece; it swerves from praising *The Sting* into an impudent proposal:

> It is all together fitting and proper that you should "discover" me.

Now, right away I know what you are thinking ("who is this kid?"), and I can understand your apprehensions. I am a nobody. No one outside of Skyline High School has heard of me, but I figure if I change my name to Clark Gable, or Humphrey Bogart, some people will recognize me. My looks are not stunning. I am not built like a Greek God, and I can't even grow a mustache, but I figure if people will pay to see certain films ("The Exorcist", for one) they will pay to see me.

Lets work out the details of my discovery. We can do it the way Lana Turner was discovered, me sitting on a soda shop stool, you walk in and notice me, and—BANGO—Im a star. Or perhaps we could meet on a bus somewhere and we casually strike up a conversation and become good friends, I come to you weeks later asking for a job. During the last few weeks you have actually been working on a script for me and—Bango!—I am a star.

I hand Hanks a printout of the letter. "Oh my God—that's my bad handwriting," he says. He reads the final section aloud, offering commentary as he goes:

"*All of these plans are fine with me, or we could do it any way you would like it. It makes no difference to me!* Exclamation mark! *But let's get one thing straight, Mr. Hill. I do not want to be some big-time, Hollywood superstar with girls crawling all over me, just a hometown, American*—Oh dear. This is a little too accurate, ain't it? *Just a hometown, American boy who has hit the big time, owns a Porsche, and calls Robert Redford 'Bob.'*"

"All right! All right!" he says, laughing. "Guilty!"

Hanks explains that after *The Sting* won an Academy Award, in 1974, everyone in his drama class wrote letters to Hill, congratulating him. "I just wrote a jokey one, you know."

But was a part of you thinking, *Maybe this will work*?

"Yeah, a little bit. I mean, you know."

What do you think when you read it now?

"Well," he says. "There's something to it." He doesn't own a Porsche. He's never, he says, "had girls crawling all over me." But he thinks he can see what he calls his "work ethic" in that letter, for one thing: "Am I wrong? I'm, 'Hey, we can do it any way you want it.'" *A hometown, American boy who has hit the big time.* An irreverent kid riffing funny, or someone imagining what could be?

Hanks flashes the kind of smile that is almost a shrug. "And by the way, I met Robert Redford, and I called him Bob."

WHEN HANKS READS something he likes, he is known to reach out to the author. Here in London, he tells me that he just finished *Blitz Spirit*, a book about everyday Britons' lives during World War II, and has written to the author, Becky Brown, informing her, "You wrote the most fascinating book I've ever read." The writer Ada Calhoun says that she and Hanks have periodically corresponded on literary subjects ever since she received a typewritten letter from him praising her book *St. Marks Is Dead: The Many Lives of America's Hippest Street*. Hanks wrote, "You made me feel like I belonged to the neighborhood. I envy your growing up days." (*Growing* was mistyped *gorwing*, but Hanks, known for both his typewriter collection and his keen advocacy of their use, had hand-corrected it in pencil, indicating that the *o* and *r* should swap places.)

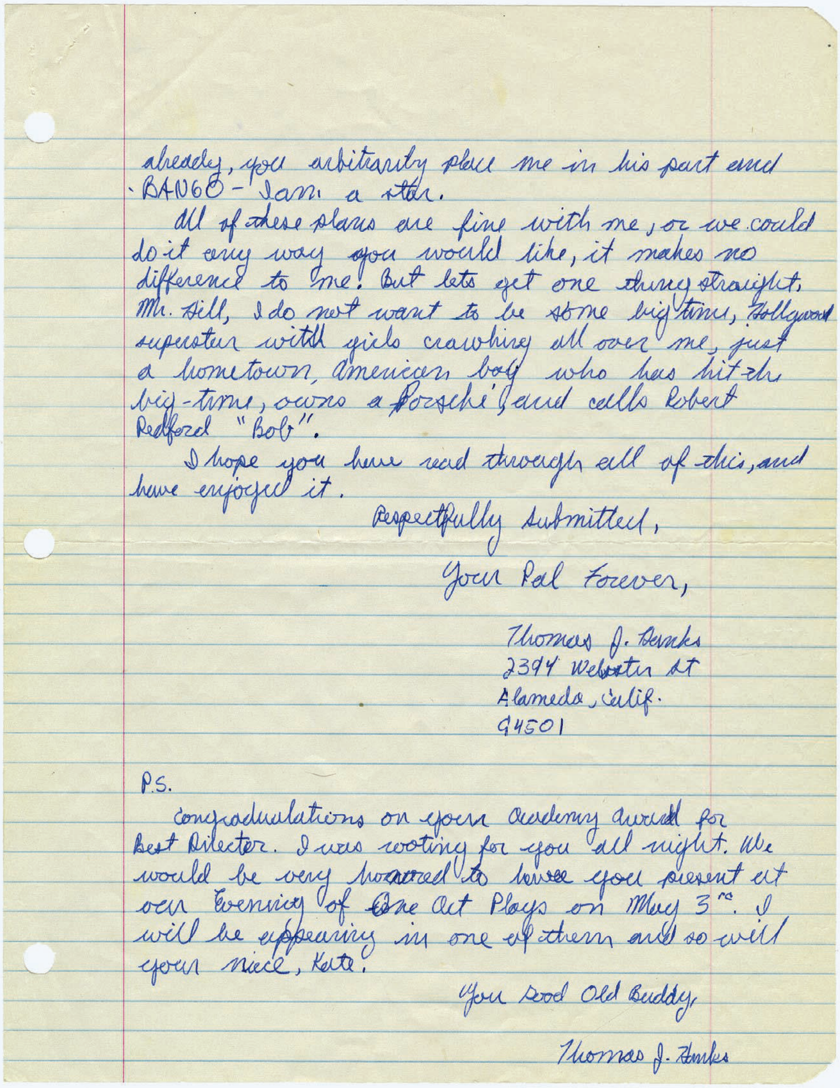
Even though Hanks had occasionally written movie and TV screenplays, and a bit of nonfiction, until about 10 years ago he'd sidestepped fiction. But after immersing himself in some *New Yorker* anthologies and reading uncollected early J. D. Salinger stories he found online, Hanks was struck with an idea for his own story about some people who launch themselves from a suburban driveway in a rocket that loops around the moon, then return to Earth. He wrote a draft "in a fevered two and a half days."

What to do next? Hanks had been in the habit of sending his nonfiction to Ephron—a characteristic response: "Voice, voice, voice"—but she was no longer around. In her stead, he sent what he had written to Steve Martin with a single question: "Is this a thing?"

"There's always a dread when a friend sends you something," Martin tells me. Once, he says, a friend of his asked for feedback on something that he didn't think was particularly good. "I said, 'I think you should work with an editor'—that was my comeback on something I didn't think was up to snuff." To his evident relief, this story was different. "It was a surprising piece," Martin says. "It was well written, it was charming, and it had flair." *The New Yorker* ended up publishing the story, called "Alan Bean Plus Four," and Hanks went on to publish a collection of short stories, *Uncommon Type*, in 2017.

After that, Hanks began to think about a novel. As he remembers it, his editor, Peter Gethers, was the one who suggested that he write about what he did for a living, and his first instinct was to resist the idea: "I said there's nothing worse than hearing an actor talk about being an actor." Then it occurred to him that there might be a broader story he did want to tell, one set in the world of moviemaking. Because, he says, "I have found that absolutely everybody assumes they know how movies are made, and nobody does." Or, as he puts it to me more grandiosely: "Like all cumulative endeavors that require a collaboration among artists who are all operating at the absolute top of their game, making a movie is exactly like starting a business, waging a war, getting to the moon, figuring out how to treat a disease, or coming up with public policy in order to make a city work better … Making a movie is as unknowable and as complex as any great saga or odyssey that is wrought with many turns of fate." Early on, he came up with a title. It would be called *The Making of Another Major Motion Picture Masterpiece*.

In 2019, while working on the Reconstruction-era movie *News of the World* in New Mexico, Hanks began writing. As he proceeded, he would periodically send new fragments to those whose opinion he trusted. Title notwithstanding, the novel would evolve into something far more ambitious and expansive—weirder and more interesting, too—than the mere chronicling of a film's creation. When Ada Calhoun received a first installment, about a boy in Northern California in 1947 being visited by his errant war-veteran uncle, she had no idea it was from the "movie novel" Hanks had told her about.



already, you arbitrarily place me in his part and BANGO - I am a star.
All of these plans are fine with me, or we could do it any way you would like, it makes no difference to me! But lets get one thing straight, Mr. Hill, I do not want to be some big time, Hollywood superstar with girls crawling all over me, just a hometown, American boy who has hit the big-time, owns a Porsche, and calls Robert Redford "Bob".
I hope you have read through all of this, and have enjoyed it.

Respectfully Submitted,

Your Pal Forever,

Thomas J. Hanks
2394 Webster St
Alameda, Calif.
94501

P.S.
Congradulations on your Academy award for Best Director. I was rooting for you all night. We would be very honored to have you present at our Evening of One Act Plays on May 3rd. I will be appearing in one of them and so will your niece, Kate.

You Good Old Buddy,

Thomas J. Hanks

A letter from high-school student Tom Hanks to director George Roy Hill

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Another early reader was the novelist Ann Patchett. She had entered Hanks's orbit after receiving an advance copy of *Uncommon Type*. Initially she ignored it—"It was just like, 'Movie star … no'"—but, with a minute to spare at the end of a day, she figured she might as well read one story. To her surprise, she was captivated. "I fell into it. I immediately stopped thinking about him and who he was and what he was doing."

Patchett, who owns a Nashville bookstore, later counseled Hanks when he was considering opening a bookstore himself; eventually, she offered to take a look at his novel in progress, reading each new section as it was completed. "I know I said at one point, 'Okay, you've got to tone down the number of times you say *ka-ching*,'" she tells me.

In one section, involving a character called Wren Lane, the female lead of the movie being made in the novel, Patchett advised that Hanks might need another character to interact with her. Hanks's solution was to give Wren a twin brother, rather than what seemed to him the more obvious option. "I didn't want to write a romance thing about a couple not getting along," he says, "because I always think that story can be told in seven words: 'He was an asshole.'"

You've got three words left, I point out.

"Exactly."

Hanks liked the process of writing a novel. One thing that helped, on days when he was free to concentrate on this project, was a productivity trick he'd read about in *The New York Times* called the Pomodoro Technique, based on a discovery made by an Italian student: If he set a timer for 25 minutes and focused totally on work for that period, then broke for five minutes, then repeated it all, he would get far more work done.

Hanks also discovered, along the way, that a different kind of writing exercise would be required. The putative "motion-picture masterpiece" in the book is a superhero movie titled *Knightshade: The Lathe of Firefall*; Hanks realized that to tell his novel's story, he had to know exactly what happened in that movie, and he could see but one good way to do that. So he paused writing his novel for a couple of months in order to write a real script for the fake movie whose filming his novel would document.

Prospective readers might presume that a book with a title like *The Making of Another Major Motion Picture Masterpiece* would be a sly, satirical dissection of filmmaking: *Come see what grand folly it is to throw together so many millions of dollars and so many hundreds of talented people under intolerable pressure to create some fragile sliver of entertainment.* Even more so when they learn that the particular sliver under examination has a name like *Knightshade: The Lathe of Firefall*. But Hanks's book is not that at all.

Hanks seems perfectly capable of seeing the world through a sardonic lens—this is a man who has barely sat down when we meet before he tells me, "The truth is, we're a business full of assholes"—and there are certainly moments, within his novel's more



Left: *Hanks in the 1988 movie* Big. Below: *Hanks and Daryl Hannah in* Splash, *1984.*



than 400 pages, when he skewers some foibles and calls out some foolishness. But at its core, what he has written is a hymn to movies and those who make them. It's a book written in the spirit Hanks invokes when he tells me that "the making of a movie is the same exact process of solving problems, dealing with assholes … or what have you. But the end result is something akin to the Brooklyn Bridge that you help make … And that's where the noble endeavor—I might get a little weepy on it here—that's the noble endeavor that you get to be a part of."

Likewise, people might expect that a novel from a big mainstream movie star like Hanks would be one where everything is in thrall to a propulsive narrative. Again, far from it. Hanks's story has a through line, and a certain amount of drama and tension and resolution, but it rarely feels as though plot is what matters most. The novel's strength and distinctiveness—and maybe its weakness, too, for anyone expecting a breezy, streamlined surge of pure entertainment—lie in the way it is guided by Hanks's relentless curiosity, and his apparent fervor to share what he knows or has seen or experienced. The book is not so much full of digressions as it is a compendium of overlapping digressions. Meet someone, and their rich backstory is usually only seconds away—often less because it'll be necessary to know any of this later on than because it feels like Hanks just wants to know and generously assumes that you'll feel the same. This extends beyond characters. There are no covered bridges in his novel, but if there were, odds are he'd tell you, in engrossing detail, that they were originally designed to avoid spooking horses by keeping the animals' eyes on the road.

EVERETT COLLECTION

THE MAKING OF *Another Major Motion Picture Masterpiece* also hews to significant parts of Hanks's life in ways that might be less immediately apparent. Much of the book takes place in and around the fictional town of Lone Butte. Early in the story, it is where a boy named Robby, who ultimately writes the comic-book source material for *Knightshade*, grows up. Later, it is the filming location for the superhero movie, where the bulk of the book's narrative takes place. Hanks confirms my suspicions that Lone Butte is a stand-in for Red Bluff, the destination of all those youthful bus trips to stay with his mother.

"Small towns in Northern California, essentially those were my summer camps," Hanks says. "I had this kind of William Saroyan take on a small town at a time when living in a small town was not necessarily the same as being poor … Red Bluff, it had a Christmas tree in the middle of the crossroads at Christmas. It had department stores and local drugstores. It had a full Bedford Falls–ish kind of life: courthouse, State Theatre. And the life that little Robby has there, those were my summers … The house that is the basis of the house, that's really a place that my mom rented for a while … Robby, growing up as he did in Lone Butte, that's me playing on the porch."

There is another story buried deeper in the same tangle of Northern California geography and history. This region was also where Hanks's father spent his own childhood. Later in life, Hanks came to realize that his father had once wanted to be a writer—when Bud came home after serving in the Navy during World War II, he went to college on the GI Bill, and there, as his son understands it, he took a few courses as an English major. "My dad came out of the war with a desire" to write, Hanks says. And he thinks he knows why.

Hanks tells me that, when Bud was very young, he witnessed his own father get killed in a fight with another man; that Bud had to take the stand three times in court, but in the end "he did not get a sense of justice from it all, and he was darkened by that." Hanks thinks the root of his dad's desire to write was to have an "outlet for an expression that he never really got." Hanks tells me that his dad never spoke with him directly about what had happened back then; he heard about it from his older brother, Larry.

I was already aware of the bare bones of this story before I met Hanks, after stumbling across a podcast interview he'd given a couple of years ago. There, Hanks said that the fatal fight his father saw took place in a barn with a hired hand. After listening to that, I spent some time searching local California newspapers from the 1930s, during the period of the murder and the subsequent trials. I was surprised by what I found. Is it strange—or, looked at another way, is it not strange at all, and maybe somehow telltale—that for all of Hanks's deep interest in the stories of strangers, he seems never to have focused that same gaze on his own history?

I explain to Hanks that the story I found was rather different from the one he has told.

"To what Dad remembered?" he asks.

Yes, I say.

I ask him if he wants me to tell him.

"Yeah," he says. "Yeah. Yeah."

It seems a very unusual role that I have somehow placed myself in, but here I am: sitting in a lavish London hotel suite one Friday morning in March 2023, telling Tom Hanks about how his grandfather was killed. It's a story that not only diverges in key ways from Hanks's version, but describes a tragedy of a more nuanced kind. According to newspaper accounts of the trials, the killer was not a hired hand; he was an old friend of Ernest Beauel Hanks—at 67, he was more than 20 years' Hanks's senior. The two of them had been hauling hay together, and the dispute—over some horses—took place in a field, not a barn. The older man testified in court that Ernest Beauel initiated the violence; the friend struck back twice with a pitchfork handle in self-defense. The misfortune of it all multiplied. Ernest Beauel was still well enough to begin driving the wagon home; when he was unable to continue, his friend took over, and eventually called a doctor. Ernest Beauel died later from a blood clot in the brain—according to one report, in his friend's arms. The other man was charged with murder but ultimately acquitted. Although Bud Hanks did take the stand, he didn't see the fight.

Hanks listens attentively as I sketch out this story's arc, only occasionally commenting. "Yeah. The pitchfork was a big thing," he says at one point. "Oh, is that right?" he says at another, surprised to hear that his father didn't witness the actual violence. "Wow," he says when I finish. After, he shares something he remembers his father saying—how much his dad hated that he was supposed to forgive the man who was responsible. Then Hanks relates something else he heard about the aftermath of it all:

"My brother told me this story—I didn't hear it from my dad—that after the war, or sometime after all of that, my dad decided he was going to kill [his father's attacker]. And showed up at his house with a shotgun, pounded on the door. The guy's wife answered. And he says, 'Do you know who I am?' She says, 'Yes, yes, you're Bud Hanks.' He said, 'Well then, you know why I'm here.' And he had a shotgun. And she says, 'Look, my husband is very sick. He's got cancer. He's going to be dead very soon. Why don't you just …' And my dad left." Hanks pauses. "That's a lot of stuff to carry around, you know."

Hanks doesn't seem resistant to discussing any of this. But I get a sense that he's talking about it at a distance, almost as though he's found himself in a conversation about an author he's never read or a country he'll probably never visit. These are the kinds of extraordinary biographical details that you feel would fire his rapacious curiosity if he heard them about someone unconnected to him: He'd want to know all the minutiae, backwards and forwards, and he'd be thrilled to tell you about what he'd learned. Maybe he's just deftly hiding his reaction to someone blundering into a topic too awkward or private or painful, though I do find myself wondering whether it could reflect something else. Perhaps, to develop into a person with a broad curiosity about the world that stretches far beyond one's own experience, it can be useful to shut oneself off from the messy specificity of one's past. But then again, maybe he's just saving it for his next novel.

IN CONSIDERING the cultural mythology around Hanks—the nice guy, the avatar of American goodness, and the rest—it's

only natural to wonder how he feels about being routinely spoken of in these ways. At an event promoting *Uncommon Type*, he'd once mimicked interviewers talking to him about the book: "Tom, Tom, Tom … short stories … You present a vision of America that is so … American."

As for the most used word of all? "I might take *nice* as almost a pejorative now," he says. At the same time, he clearly knows that people appear to detect something in him, and when I float the idea that he has become some kind of symbol of rectitude, he doesn't entirely push the thought away.

"Rectitude?" he muses. "Fairness? Yeah."

Nearly as old as the "Tom Hanks is the nicest guy in Hollywood" trope is the determination to search for Hanks's "dark side." The quest has typically borne little fruit. Nonetheless, in a recent, unfortunate turn of events, Hanks has become one of the key celebrity targets of QAnon conspiracy theories, and, in what seems to be a toxic inversion of his beneficent public persona, has been smeared with the usual parade of repugnant grotesqueries.

Asked how unpleasant this is for him, at first Hanks affects complete indifference.

"It's not unpleasant at all," he says. "It just is. You know, I don't care." A soft chuckle. A little later, though, he shares the slightly more nuanced reaction he had upon first learning what was being said about him. At some point he'd heard, he says, that "it was Hillary Clinton—I won't say the other names—other famous people, me, involved in some sort of satanic thing. And for a moment, I said, 'Oh my God, we have to do something about that.' And I'm going to say for about 45 minutes, I was undone by this. And on the 46th minute, I said"—he laughs—"'Oh, fuck. I'm going to fight *this*?'"

But there was worse to come. Last October, a man who had posted about QAnon conspiracy theories online broke into Nancy Pelosi's San Francisco home and attacked her husband, Paul. The assailant told police he had a list of other targets. One of them was Hanks.

"Oh yeah," Hanks acknowledges, and then exclaims, almost as though remembering something funny, "I got a call from the FBI!"

What happened?

"They had to do it on a Zoom, and they had to show me their credentials, and they just informed me: My name was on that list. And that's all they were doing. They said, 'You should know this.' And I said, 'Wow.'"

And that was all?

"That's it. I said, 'Really? Hey, wow.' I thought, *I'll let everybody I love know.* But again, what are you going to let control your life, for crying out loud?"

Hanks offers a corollary from wartime history, something he read in the William Manchester book *Goodbye, Darkness*—how General MacArthur, aware of huge pockets of Japanese forces and arms on various Pacific islands, deliberately decided not to attack them. "And so these Japanese soldiers essentially sat out the war doing nothing." MacArthur just left them there. "And I thought, *That's friggin' brilliant. You're really smart in the battles you don't fight.*"

HANKS REALIZED long ago that he has no interest in a particular kind of story: those with a protagonist and an antagonist. "I always gravitate towards things where there is no antagonist," he explains. In the stories that interest him, humanity can't be so easily divided up; what distinguishes characters is that "some people have an opinion that doesn't win the day."

Yet you work in movies, a storytelling medium addicted to protagonists and antagonists.

"Even as a young kid, I never bought it. I never found it to be satisfying."

Hanks remembers an observation that Gethers, his editor, made while he was working on *Uncommon Type*. "Peter said, 'I've noticed something about these stories of yours,'" he recalls: that they're "'always about people helping people who might not have helped them normally.'" He asks whether I've ever read the "Metropolitan Diary" in the *Times*, with its quotidian tales from regular lives. "They're almost always about some pleasant little moment, even if it's just somebody saying the right thing."

And you like that?

"Oh God, I can't get enough of it."

Sometimes, he wonders what it would have been like to be a different kind of person altogether. If, say, he'd turned out to be a quiet guy, like Larry, his older brother. L. M. Hanks is a respected entomology professor (a representative academic-paper title: "The Role of Minor Pheromone Components in Segregating 14 Species of Longhorned Beetles"), and also is, Tom says, "the funniest human being I've ever met." But his brother "is dry and he is bashful … I'm loud; I'm totally different." He tells me about his brother's insect-collecting field trips in their youth—at a place near Red Bluff called Hogsback, Tom in tow—and how Larry's bedroom was full of carefully mounted bugs. "And I wish I would have had that kind of specific focus," he says, "as opposed to some sort of attention deficit disorder for me that is always jumping from one story to the next."

At one point in our conversation, pressed into another way to explain himself, Hanks begins a thought with "In my writing—" then stops himself.

"I don't like to say 'In my writing.'"

Why not?

"Because it makes it sound as though I'm"—he assumes a pompous voice—"'Well, in my writing …'"

Which makes you sound like what?

"Like people who do it in order to say, 'Well, you know, in my writing …' I just do writing. I write because I've got too many fucking stories in my head. And it's fun."

I ask him what he thinks his talent is.

"Holding people's interest? Does that make sense? In warranting their investment in listening to me."

Don't be misled by the modesty of Hanks's language. I think he's well aware that one downside of a graceful affability is that it can make what you do look effortless; it can tempt people to take you for granted.

One evening nearly 30 years ago, Hanks was eating with his wife, his mother-in-law, and a friend at a restaurant called Coco Pazzo when the maître d' asked for a word. He said that Joe DiMaggio, who was dining alone, wondered whether Hanks might come over to his table. Naturally, Hanks jumped at the chance. They chatted for a while—it turned out DiMaggio knew that Hanks was from Oakland—and DiMaggio told Hanks, "I like your pictures." Hanks told DiMaggio in turn that when reviewers said that Hanks made it look easy, he



Left: *A young Hanks and his mother.* Below: *Hanks, as a college student in 1977, carrying scenery backstage for a production of* Hamlet.



COURTESY OF TOM HANKS

often thought of what people said about DiMaggio—that *he'd* made playing center field look like it was easy.

"And," Hanks remembers, "he said, 'Yeah, it looked easy on the outside, but'"—and Hanks imitates how DiMaggio clutched his hands over his heart—"'not in here.'" Hanks repeats DiMaggio's words: *Not in here*. "I'll never forget," Hanks says. "His hands—his hands were huge."

And you've felt the same feeling, I say.

"I think that is one of the deep reasons why I wanted to do the book in the first place," he says. "If I was going to say 'What's the theme of this?,' it's that doing this is not as easy as it seems. That doing this is so difficult that it breaks people wide open. You can look at all sorts of people that had the ability, had the credit, and then took the deep-throw shot, it didn't work, and they were gone … It's hard, man. It's hard … And the joy and the fun have to come in spite of the fact that it's difficult."

The hotel suite we've been talking in is so big that it has rooms I never even see. On our way out, toward the door, is a baby grand piano. I guess that "Tom Hanks," as the world imagines him, would reach out with both hands for the keys as he passed, almost without breaking stride, and release a ripple of discordant notes—just enough, maybe, to feel like it was a nod to *Big*'s magical keyboard scene, or as though it simply needed to be done because it would be such a waste if you could have, but didn't. And—given that the Tom Hanks you want him to be is, more often than not, the Tom Hanks he is—this is exactly what he does. *A*

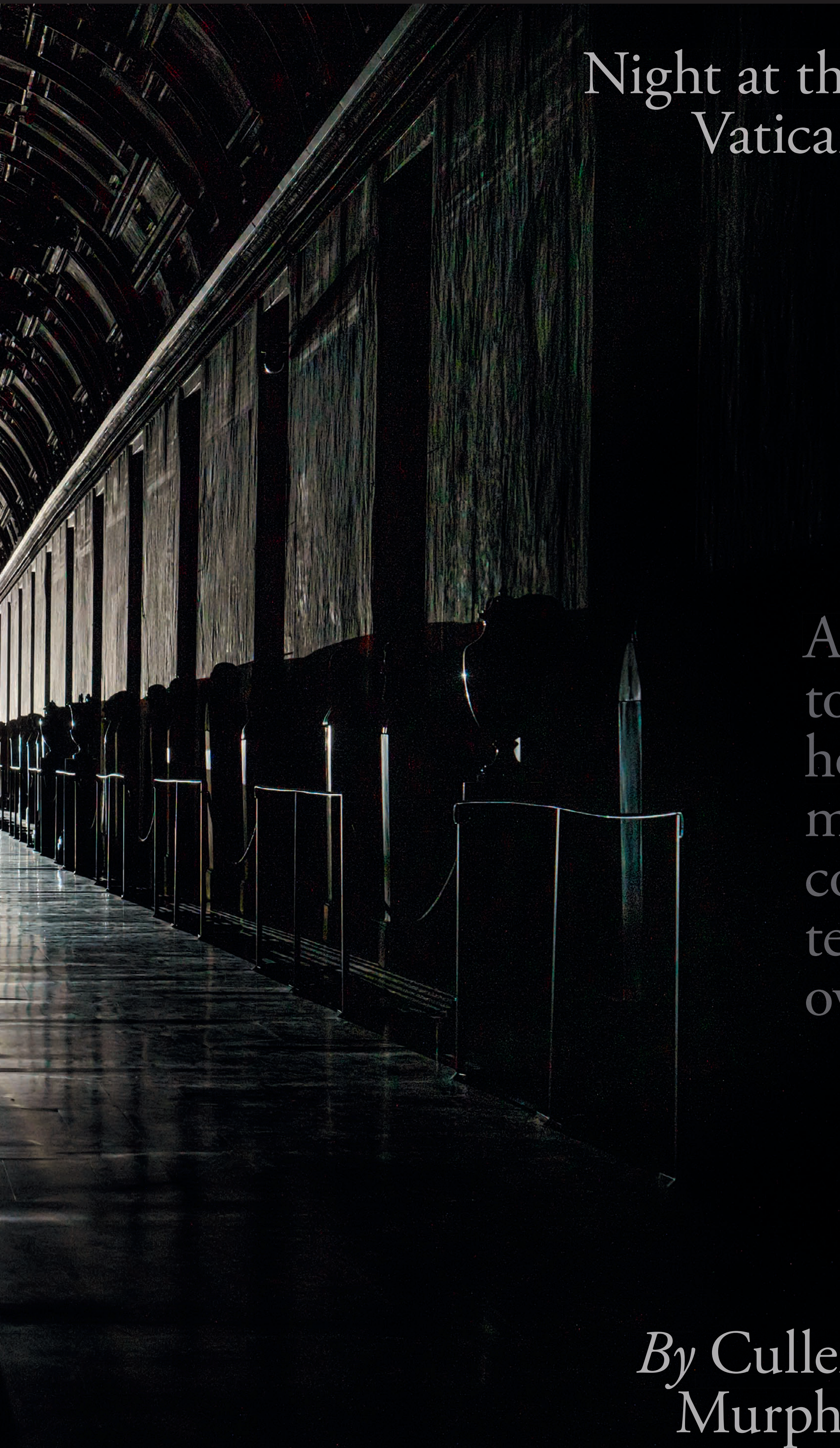
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Photographs by Alex Majoli



Gianni Crea, keeper of the keys, in the Gallery of Maps at the Vatican Museums

Night at the Vatican



After the tourists go home, a museum's collection tells its own story.

By Cullen Murphy

A

At the Vatican Museums, the nightly ritual of the keys begins in Room 49A, a tight, windowless chamber, generally referred to as *il bunker*, which I entered one evening last November from a grassy courtyard as rain began to fall. The keeper of the keys—the *clavigero*—is a former member of the carabinieri named Gianni Crea. He has a staff of about a dozen, and keeps nearly 3,000 keys in the bunker. Can he match each one to a lock? At the Vatican, yes, he said; he has trouble at home. Some keys, like No. 401, which weighs a pound and opens the main interior door to the oldest of the museum buildings, were forged centuries ago; others resemble keys you'd find in a hardware store or a kitchen drawer. Many have plastic tags with handwritten labels. They open every utility box, every window, every gate and portal.

The heavy bronze doors at the museums' main entrance are pulled shut every afternoon at 4 p.m. and locked with a key numbered 2,000. Over the next two hours, until the exit doors are also closed, the last visitors proceed through the hallways. Behind them, here and there, lights begin to dim. Metal detectors power down. At the glassed-in security station in the Atrium of the Four Gates, departing guards punch time cards. Behind the glass, alongside a crucifix and a photograph of Pope Francis, a flatscreen presents live images from security cameras. The screen gives the enclosure a quiet glow.

Each sector of the museum has its own large key ring, the kind carried by a jailer. On this night, when the last of the visitors had gone, Crea piled a tangle of keys on the counter of the security station, then handed out key rings to his staff. The lockdown got under way. He kept a larger set of keys for himself, so that he and I could make our way anywhere.

Before leaving the bunker, Crea had taken a key from an envelope. The flap, now torn, bore his signature and had been stamped with the papal coat of arms. He had picked up the key that morning from a command post at the Porta Sant'Anna, one of the Vatican gateways, and would return it shortly before midnight. He handed the key to me, gesturing to a tiny, unmarked vault in the wall of the bunker. I opened the vault and found another key. If Lewis Carroll had invented a nuclear-launch protocol for the Holy See, this might have been it. The key in the vault was the key to the Sistine Chapel.

I HAD COME OFTEN to the Vatican Museums ever since a first visit when I was in grade school. Over the years I had written about some of the museums' activities, and on several occasions had met with the director, the art historian Barbara Jatta. But I had long wanted to experience the museums in a different way: to wander the four and a half miles of hallways after the doors close and to be there in the early hours before the doors open; to explore the collection—the 20,000 sculptures and paintings and other works on display—as night settles over Rome and the galleries adjust to a quieter state of being. A few months ago, I got my wish: The Vatican Museums agreed to let me spend most of a night inside and to go wherever I wanted. I would always be in the company of the *clavigero* and of another member of the staff, by turns Matteo Alessandrini, the head of the press office, and a colleague, Megan Eckley, both of whom I knew well. Not unusually, Matteo represents a second generation with a Vatican calling. His father, Costanzo, had served Pope John Paul II as a personal bodyguard.

The Vatican Museums—there are many separate units—occupy what is essentially a rectangle. To the north, the Belvedere Palace, which began life as a 15th-century papal villa, lies hard against Vatican City's massive walls. To the south, near St. Peter's Basilica, a quarter of a mile away, is the Sistine Chapel. Two long loggias link north to south and form the rectangle's sides. The space these buildings enclose is divided into courtyards.



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The nightly lockdown begins: Gianni Crea at the central security station, Atrium of the Four Gates



We decided to start the evening where the museums themselves had started, in the Belvedere Palace. The creators of what are now the Vatican Museums, half a millennium ago, were driven by a radical change in perspective. For centuries, the bountiful supply of ancient statuary unearthed in Rome had been burned for lime to make mortar. With the revival of classical learning, Renaissance popes began to preserve the marble instead, putting the best pieces on display in the Belvedere's Octagonal Courtyard. The collection grew and the mission broadened. In time, visionaries such as Johann Joachim Winckelmann and Antonio Canova created something like a modern museum. It remains modern in its scholarship and expertise, and in many of its operations.

But it is also the world's oldest major museum, and, as Jatta emphasizes, a



The Niccoline Chapel, inside the Apostolic Palace, with frescoes by Fra Angelico

spiritual dimension is part of its mission. Some precincts are consecrated space. The gift shops sell more rosaries than anything else. The original buildings were meant for the personal use of the pope, and in places encompass a confusing warren of small rooms and narrow staircases that were never intended to receive 7 million visitors a year. The scale of the Vatican Museums can be hard to comprehend—20 acres of wall space—and the task of renewal and conservation is perpetual. Masonry subsides and cracks. Frescoes fade. Roofs leak. Only four spaces have air-conditioning. The museum complex is not a static object. It is an organism, and life flows through it.

Earlier in the day, I had stopped in to see Marco Maggi, the head of the conservator's office. His job comes with a pedigree—the first person to hold it was appointed in 1543. The office oversees the various restoration laboratories but its primary responsibility is to keep materials from deteriorating in the first place—statues and paintings, to be sure, but also mummy linens, Roman glass, medieval parchment, Renaissance tapestries, and items made of bronze or bone, feathers or sealskin. Reflecting on the biography of every object—the unique journey each has made to this place across miles and years—Maggi repeated an observation he'd once heard, and that stayed with me all night. "Time," he said, "is an emotion."

THE IDEA THAT A MUSEUM comes alive at night—that works of art themselves might relax and chat when people are not there—animates movies and novels and children's books. And there is a sort of truth to the idea: After hours, life goes on. As we set out among the galleries, faint noises from the ceiling called attention to a skylight. Workers above could be heard talking as they washed the exterior, their movements backlit like those of puppets in a shadow play. Elsewhere, cleaners with soft brushes in their hands and vacuum cleaners strapped to their backs gently dusted imperial Roman statues—an animal's claws, an athlete's thighs, an emperor's beard. In a conservation laboratory set among exhibits, technicians in white coats worked late, repairing the frayed edge of a woven artifact from Africa.

The museums at night can feel like an elaborate play structure: gilded corridors the length of a football field, rooms

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The statue of Laocoön in the Octagonal Courtyard, the nucleus of the Vatican Museums

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teeming with a stone zoo of lions and crocodiles and other marble creatures, darkened galleries and countless places to hide. Every door conceals a surprise. In the Belvedere Palace, the *clavigero* unlocked a gate that gave access to a tower encasing the Bramante staircase, a spiral ramp named for the chief architect of Pope Julius II. It is a double helix—people can ascend and descend without crossing paths—and large enough to accommodate a papal carriage, as it once had to do. The staircase links the lofty interior of the palace to an exterior private entrance far below. We stepped outside, at ground level, into a downpour. A fountain in the shape of a galleon sprayed jets of water from masts and cannons, as if trying to fight off the weather. Back upstairs, the Octagonal Courtyard was dimly lit and open to the sky. Rain glazed a ring of sarcophagi and pelted a central pool. Some of the Vatican's original treasures are still here. One alcove frames the ancient statue known as *Laocoön*. I moved a velvet rope aside and walked behind the statue, and was surprised to find an object affixed to the base: a lone marble arm.

Laocoön was the man who tried to warn his fellow Trojans about that gift of a wooden horse. Angry, one of the gods sent serpents to strangle Laocoön and his sons—the moment captured in marble. The sculpture, from the first century B.C., had been unearthed in a vineyard near the Colosseum in 1506—Michelangelo was present for the excavation—and became the nucleus of the Vatican collection. But bits were missing, including the father's right arm. Could the arm be restored?

Restoration was once standard practice; along with fig leaves, classical statues gained hands, noses, and entire limbs made from plaster or marble. As recently as a few decades ago, souvenir-seekers might snap off a plaster finger, leaving a trace of white dust on the floor.

To restore *Laocoön*, the pope's architect held a competition, appointing Raphael as judge. Eventually an arm was added, slightly bent but reaching upward—the version preserved in countless copies. Michelangelo was skeptical; an experienced anatomist, he inferred that Laocoön's arm must have been angled sharply behind his head. Four hundred years later, a big piece of the missing limb was discovered. Michelangelo had been right. The original arm was reattached. The discarded arm was left

There was not a living soul in the gleaming straightaway of the Chiaramonti loggia, and yet it was full of life.

behind the statue, where on a rainy night the beam of a flashlight picked it out.

A MUSEUM LOSES SOMETHING when visitors are gone: People are part of the display. But it gains something in return. In the emptiness of night, you become acutely aware of your physical senses. Eyes adjust to changing gradations of light. Black windows become mirrors. Shadows dance at light's command: Projected on a wall, marble stallions pulling a Roman chariot seem to rear in anger; an unfinished angel by Bernini in clay and wire becomes even larger and hovers protectively over a Caravaggio. Faint smells come into their own. A whiff of paint lingers in a room that has been newly restored. A scent of candle wax pervades a papal chapel. The acoustic environment is unexpected. Every sound creates an echo—voices, footsteps, keys, raindrops. The high-low wail of a siren from the city outside seems impossibly remote. There is an urge to touch, to run a hand across surfaces like the underside of a Raphael tapestry, whose filaments of golden thread give the appearance of a circuit board.

Without the bustle, I was aware of another sense too, a kind of sixth sense: a consciousness of actual lives bound up with whatever I was looking at. In the Pinacoteca, the picture gallery, we passed Leonardo da Vinci's *Saint Jerome*; Leonardo's fingerprint was clearly visible in a patch of blue-green sky. A few rooms away, lit up and richly colored in an otherwise darkened space, Raphael's *The Transfiguration* might have been a stained-glass window. It was easy to see why this place had been chosen for a memorial Mass, a few weeks earlier, recognizing staff members who had died or suffered loss in the previous year. On the same floor, in the older rooms of the Belvedere Palace, the presence of Michelangelo was inescapable: A visitor sees what he would have seen. Michelangelo came to this place to study the *Belvedere Torso*, a marble dating to the first century B.C. He thought of the torso—its arms missing, its legs cut off at the knees—as his "teacher" and used the taut anatomy in his portrayal of Adam on the Sistine Chapel's ceiling. In an adjacent room stands a basin, carved from a single slab of imperial porphyry, that may once have graced Emperor Nero's Golden House. It is said that Nero and his wife used to bathe in it, a detail I pass along understanding that *It is said*, a staple phrase in Rome, generally means "Don't look too closely." But ordinary people are also reflected in the basin's history. The porphyry, weighing half a ton, had been quarried in Egypt. Hundreds of lives were invested in hauling and floating it to Rome. It would not have been an easy task.

There was not a living soul in the gleaming straightaway of the Chiaramonti loggia, which extends south from the Belvedere Palace, and yet it was full of life. Marble heads of ancient Romans are arranged side by side on tiers of shelves that stretch for 100 yards. Some are idealized renderings of gods and emperors. Some are busts of people one might actually have known. They capture receding hairlines, double chins, unfortunate fads in coiffure; they capture pride, love, vanity, sadness. The names of many of these men and women have been lost. In some cases, all that is certain is a place of origin and a date, along the lines of SYRIA, 1ST CENTURY B.C. or DACIA, 3RD CENTURY A.D. But the individuality of the features, the imprint of personality, is too strong to ignore. I could imagine these people suddenly alive, marble becoming flesh, eyes blinking in surprise. Their expressive faces send a message that recalls an inscription in Rome's Capuchin ossuary: WHAT YOU ARE NOW, WE ONCE WERE.

Among the 1,000 pieces of sculpture in the loggia, two busts were gone, their absence as obvious as missing teeth; all that remained were ragged circles marking where the bases had been fixed to a shelf. A few weeks earlier, an American tourist had told a guard that he needed to see the pope. Informed that a meeting was not possible, he had knocked the two busts to the floor. One of them—*Veiled Head of an Old Man*—lost part of his nose and an ear. The bust is being repaired, but this old Roman, whoever he was, will forever bear the marks of an encounter in 2022.

The Vatican Museums employ undercover personnel known as *volanti*, who walk among the crowds. But incidents still occur. In August, climate protesters from an organization called Last Generation glued their hands to the base of *Laocoön*. (A few weeks earlier, the same group had splashed pea soup on Van Gogh's *The Sower*, also in Rome.) The Vatican has a court system but few jail cells. The *Laocoön* perpetrators were remanded to Italy, a few yards away.

The American tourist who knocked over the busts likewise found himself in Italian custody. Word of the incident spread quickly. When Barbara Jatta saw Pope Francis at an event not long afterward, his first words to the museums' director were "Who was that poor man?"

WE LEFT ANCIENT ROME behind and headed for the newest part of the museums—the Anima Mundi gallery, devoted to works from beyond the Western world. The route to the gallery led past a terrace that looked out across the Vatican

The shadow of a stallion comes between a discus thrower and the god Hermes in the Hall of the Chariot.



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The Sistine Chapel. To the left of the altar, under Michelangelo's The Last Judgment*, stands the door to the Room of Tears.*

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gardens to the dome of St. Peter's and the misty silhouettes of umbrella pines. The dome was lit gently, except for the blazing lantern atop its crown. Antonio Paolucci, a former director of the museums, used to say that the best time to view the dome at night would have been centuries ago, when only the moon gave illumination. Electric lighting, he felt, made the lantern look like a birthday cake. Tonight, in the wet air, it wore a halo.

I was not prepared for the beauty of the Anima Mundi gallery—a sleek, modern space the size of a small warehouse. The gallery was dark but the collection was revealed in illuminated vitrines that arose like glass meeting rooms in an open-plan office. Many of the objects had been gifts to popes. Father Nicola Mapelli, the director of the gallery, walked among objects he especially loves: funerary poles and *wandjina* rock art from Australia; a ritual mask from Tierra del Fuego; a red-eyed, black-skinned Madonna and Child from New Guinea.

Museum officials sometimes speak of Anima Mundi as "the next Sistine Chapel," and a big part of the museums' future. Most of the Church's growth is outside Europe and North America. Of course, the existing Sistine Chapel remains a big part of the future too. We made our way toward the chapel and the Raphael Rooms, at the far end of the rectangle. Pausing by a window, Matteo Alessandrini pointed to the Mater Ecclesiae Monastery, on the Vatican grounds. The time was about 10 o'clock, and a single room was lit—the *salone* of the pope emeritus, Benedict XVI. He had only a month to live.

A few moments later, Matteo indicated a small handle in a frescoed wall and pulled out a thin rectangle of masonry. Behind it was a pane of glass, embedded in the wall centuries ago as an early-warning system: Cracked glass would mean the building had begun to subside. I reached in with a finger. We were okay for now.

In the Raphael Rooms—four chambers that Raphael covered with frescoes in what were once a suite of papal apartments—heavy wooden shutters had been closed against the night, but an open window was still reflected in the polished shield of a figure on an opposite wall: a trompe l'oeil joke by the artist. Gouges in the walls are still visible, the work of soldiers with pikes during the Sack of Rome in 1527. Raphael had been painting the last of these four rooms, the Room of



Father Nicola Mapelli and lab technicians working after hours at the conservation laboratory in the Anima Mundi gallery

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Constantine, when a fever carried him off. Graffiti, centuries old, has been scratched into its lower walls: ***FU FATTO PAPA PIO IV***, someone wrote, noting the election of a new pontiff. That was in 1559.

FROM THE RAPHAEL ROOMS, the Sistine Chapel was only a few staircases away. Its most striking aspect, when you enter alone and in weak light, is not the frescoed ceiling but the sheer expanse of floor. During the day, when the room is packed with people, all looking up, the floor disappears. Once, years ago, lifted toward the chapel's ceiling in the basket of a cherry picker, I had the chance of a bird's-eye view. But I naturally looked up, and not at the five-story drop.

Now, late in the evening, after Gianni Crea turned the key and pulled the knob, an expanding trapezoid of light from the hallway behind us illuminated the intricate marble inlay ahead.

An axis of braided circles ran down the length to the altar, the effect dynamic and yet placid. This is the tessellated floor that Michelangelo would have known—the one that received any droppings of paint that missed the scaffolding or his face. It's the floor Raphael would have walked on when (it is said) he took advantage of Michelangelo's absence from Rome to sneak a look at the work in progress. The chapel would not be cleaned until morning, but as lights came on I saw little in the way of litter—unusual in a room that as many as 25,000 people walk through every day. The explanation may simply be the power of this place, its sacral nature. People do leave prayers. I found a folded slip of paper on the masonry bench that runs along the walls, saw what it was, and put it back.

Free of distraction, you have a chance to notice details—for instance, the spots high on the walls where Michelangelo was unable to paint, because his scaffolding got in the way. Or how the plane of *The Last Judgment* leans forward, as if to convey active urgency; the slant is obvious at the join, where the front wall meets the sidewalls. Digital sensors, visible once you look for them, collect data from all parts of the chapel. They monitor temperature, humidity, carbon dioxide, and particulates, as well as the size of the crowd. The data are tracked on screens in the conservator's office; we likely produced a blip just by opening the door and turning on a light. The Sistine Chapel is one of those few air-conditioned spaces in the

A door opened, near the Sistine Chapel's altar, and a man stood silhouetted in a bright rectangle: He was standing at the entrance to the Room of Tears.



Vatican Museums. The air in the room can be exchanged as often as 60 times a day. If need be, the volume of traffic can be reduced by controllers upstream. They can close doors and loop throngs into a detour, or encourage exploration. People should know about Etruscan art anyway. But the chapel never fully shakes off its millions of annual visitors—their dust, their heat, their coughs and sneezes.

Those visitors arrive through a single entrance and leave through a single exit. But there are additional doors—another thing you notice when the room stands empty. The Sistine Chapel is part of the Apostolic Palace, the official papal residence, and some doors, usually locked, lead directly into private areas. Late in the evening, an elderly priest came through the double doors in the wall farthest from the altar, perhaps drawn by light seeping underneath them at an odd hour. We were invited into the Sala Regia, an ornate hall in the Apostolic Palace where popes once received royalty, and then into the Pauline Chapel, where cardinals celebrate Mass before a papal conclave begins. It is also a private chapel for the pope. There was to be a funeral here the next morning for a dignitary identified only as *un diplomatico*. Michelangelo's last paintings dominate the sidewalls of the chapel—*The Conversion of Saul* and *The Crucifixion of Saint Peter*. Peter is shown being crucified upside down, as tradition says he was. But the head is torqued, lifting off the cross so that Peter can see into the room. His dark eyes followed me all the way down the center aisle, and all the way back.

Later, another door opened, near the Sistine Chapel's altar, and a man stood silhouetted in a bright rectangle: He was standing at the entrance to the Room of Tears. Immediately upon election, a new pope takes refuge here in order to reflect on the weight thrust upon him, and to change into a white cassock. The man in the doorway, its custodian, allowed us in.

It is a suite, not a single room. The vestibule holds a red plush Victorian love seat. White cassocks in various sizes hang on a rack in the room beyond; one of them should fit any newly elected pontiff well enough. A final room contains a small wooden desk bearing a nameplate from the most recent conclave: BERGOGLIO, the surname of Pope Francis. On a shelf nearby sit boxes labeled *BIANCA* and *NERA*—chemical additives used to produce white or black smoke during a conclave, after each vote. In the vestibule, the custodian pointed to an alcove sheltering a waist-high antique cabinet. Did we know what it was? With a flourish, he opened the cabinet to reveal a commode, the oval seat upholstered in rich red leather.

The Vatican Museums go dark for everyone before midnight. It was 11 p.m., and time to leave. The lights in the Sistine Chapel were extinguished, and the door swung shut. A quarter of a mile later, Crea returned the chapel's key to its vault. Alarms were set. Outside, Crea locked the museums' back entrance and put the key to the vault (in a freshly sealed envelope, signed and stamped) and the key to the back door into a zippered pouch. This he deposited at a command post on his way out of the city-state. Until about 5 a.m., no one would be inside.

I WOULD SEE the Sistine Chapel once more. Two hours before dawn, as the rain tapered off, the gates of the Porta Sant'Anna swung open for Crea's BMW.

On a wall in the Pinacoteca, the picture gallery, Caravaggio's Deposition *and the specter of a Bernini angel*



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One of the Swiss guards at the gate saluted and then bent to the window. The guardsmen wore not the ceremonial uniform of red, blue, and yellow but the deep-blue service uniform, still with a Renaissance flair—breeches, knee socks, tunic, beret. Instead of swords, the guards carried sidearms. They were young and fit, and looked capable of a kinetic response to Stalin's mocking question "How many divisions has the pope?" The car was waved through.

We stopped at the command post to pick up the pouch, then drove farther into Vatican City. The car crossed a courtyard, passed under a building, made some sharp turns, and came out amid the Vatican gardens alongside a road that leads to the back entrance of the museums. This is the route typically taken by guests of the Holy See's secretary of state and by certain

The recently restored Room of Constantine, the chamber Raphael was working on when he died



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other visitors. French President Emmanuel Macron had recently come this way. A year earlier, Kim Kardashian, arriving with Kate Moss, had created a stir, wearing what appeared to be a spray-on white doily; she had to put on a long coat before being allowed to enter the Sistine Chapel. Members of the staff still spoke about that visit. (Moss, they said, had been lovely.)

When other guards arrived, Crea unlocked the entrance. Inside, switches were flicked. The security station glowed once more. *Tutto okay?* one of the men said into a phone—a routine call to the central office of the *governatorato*, the Vatican's city hall, which manages the alarm system. Yes, everything was okay. Crea began handing out rings of keys. He himself took No. 401 and proceeded to the double doors that give entry to the Belvedere Palace. Using both arms, he pulled them open.



The museums' doors would soon be opening. The hallways had begun to awaken.

We meandered along the Gallery of the Tapestries. The hall was dark, but a flashlight framed the risen Christ in a bright circle. We arrived once more at the Sistine Chapel. The door to the Sala Regia opened briefly, revealing a flash of color: Swiss guards stood smartly in ceremonial uniforms, helmets catching the light—an honor guard for the diplomat's funeral. The counterpoint in the chapel was a red-haired woman in a white smock, armed with a bucket, a broom, and a mop.

She worked with propulsive energy, first wiping down the altar and then sweeping 6,000 square feet of marble floor. I introduced myself; her name was Barbara and her grip was strong. She said she cleaned not only the chapel but also the stairs leading to and from it, and the toilets nearby and some of the laboratories. The chapel took her an hour; some of her supplies were kept behind the altar. She liked starting every day like this, and explained why with an arc of her arm that took in the ceiling. The contents of her dustpan confirmed the scarcity of litter: six small museum tickets, a handful of tissues, a couple of candy wrappers, a scrunchie. When her sweeping was done, Barbara opened a wooden cabinet against a wall and wheeled out a machine resembling a small Zamboni. Pushing it by hand, she polished the entire floor. The triumphant figure of Christ in *The Last Judgment* seemed protective, watching over Barbara as she worked. I knew that the figure's torso had been based on that of *Laocoön*, but saw now that the right arm was angled over his head, as Michelangelo knew it should be, not raised above. He had made his point.

The museums' doors would soon be opening. The hallways had begun to awaken. Guards passed by in twos and threes. Salespeople unloaded boxes from carts: fresh supplies of guidebooks and rosaries, key chains and plush toys. An aroma of espresso trailed from a break room. Near the gates, metal detectors blinked on. Outside, below the Vatican's high walls, the colored flags of tour guides poked above the crowd.

We sought higher ground, climbing to a terrace that overlooks the Cortile della Pigna, the Pinecone Courtyard. The view, Barbara Jatta told me, had made this terrace a favorite spot: It offers a panorama of the Vatican and all of Rome. The storm had passed. A thin haze lay over the city, pierced by domes and towers. The sun, low above the Alban Hills, was on the verge of breaking through.

I was conscious of the way the various cogs of a museum's life turn at different rates. The slow, unending process of accretion over centuries. The biography, sometimes tortuous, of every object. The cyclical flood of visitors. The start-and-stop progress through a gallery. And the sudden spark of provocation, when something you see triggers a thought or a memory—a long-ago visit here with a parent, a moment of love or friendship, an inexplicable vibration of the spirit. In that instant, a museum exists for the visitor alone. I had been carrying around Marco Maggi's words like a riddle—"Time is an emotion"—even as the meaning fell into place. *A*

Cullen Murphy is an editor at large of The Atlantic *and has reported frequently from Rome. His most recent book is* Just Passing Through: A Seven-Decade Roman Holiday: The Diaries and Photographs of Milton Gendel *(2022).*

Culture & Critics



OMNIVORE

Call of the Wild

The enduring appeal of watching human beings attempt to master the Alaskan backcountry

By James Parker

Overheard in the men's bathroom of a movie theater in Boston, after a screening of *Creed III*:

> "That movie basically just makes me want to get in shape."
> "It makes me want to get in shape mentally."
> "Huh?"
> "Bro, that movie was all about mental stuff. You didn't get that?"

The mental stuff. That's where it's at. The mind, the mind—it can bear you sweetly along on pulses of transparent super-energy, or it can rear up and bite your face off. And if, like me, you've watched 432 episodes of survival TV, the beloved subgenre that pits bare, forked man against the unrelenting wilderness, you've seen it happen over and over again. It's not Alaska that breaks you, or Mongolia, or northeastern Labrador—it's the contents of your own head.

Remember Jim Shields from Season 3 of *Alone*? How passionately I relate to this guy. Deposited on the cold shore of a fuming-with-bleakness lake in the Andean foothills, with only a couple of GoPros for company (that's the hook of *Alone*: no camera crews; the contestants film themselves), he spreads his arms, throws back his head, and, in an attempt at exultation, bellows, "PATAGONI-AAAAH!"—only to be almost visibly demolished, half a second later, by the ensuing unresponding immensity of silence and solitude. He exhales, as if the weight of it is about to collapse his rib cage. He looks momentarily holographic, like he might go fuzzy and vanish from the picture. And sure enough, on only his third day out there, his third day in the storm and vacancy of his own aloneness, Shields "taps out." He can't take it anymore: He radios the producers. His *Alone* time is over.

For comparison, Zach Fowler—the modest prodigy of durability who won that season of *Alone*—lasted 87 days (and lost more than 70 pounds in the process). Fowler, a boatbuilder, kept himself busy, did not wallow. This is the aspect of *Alone*, which has run for nine seasons, that made people love it with particular intensity during the pandemic. For those 87 days, Fowler was Kipling's "man of infinite-resource-and-sagacity":

MARK NEWMAN / GETTY; GETTY; LAFLOR / GETTY

ILLUSTRATION BY OLIVER MUNDAY

fishing, chopping wood, a marvel to behold as he managed his plummeting calories and husbanded his plummeting moods. Shields, in contrast, Shields, my spirit-mirror. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't have the skills," he reflected to his GoPro. "It's just a matter of one skill that I can't control. My brain."

On USA Network right now, you can find *Race to Survive: Alaska*, in which eight pairs of contestants huff and puff their way into some very hard-core Alaskan topography—six races over 100-plus miles, with no shelter provided. Interpersonal crack-ups are inevitable. Look at Jeff and Hunter Leininger, father-and-son partners, laden with gear, laden with father-son issues, toiling grimly through the Tongass Forest in the first episode. "OUGHH!" says young Hunter, bringing up the rear, as he gets thwapped by a recoiling limb. "Right in the *face*!" "Don't be right behind me, Hunter," his father responds testily. "You know that!" The wilderness glints; the producers rub their hands. This will get worse.

Alaska seems to be a perfect place for all of this to go down—the flapping, still-open, still-wild, burning-and-freezing American frontier where you're either alone, alone, all, all alone, or tearing each other to pieces. *Outlast*, which you can find on Netflix, is the next twist. Here 16 aloners/survivalists/bushcrafters/berry-munching nutcases are dumped in the Alaskan outback for as long as they can stand it. No rules, no end date: You either tap out or get medevaced. As usual, everybody's plodding around in the cold, whittling and splicing and setting snares and muttering about protein, but with a crucial refinement, the contest's single law: They must form teams. Nobody wins this game in isolation. No prizes, this time, for going it alone. It's the last team standing, the last unit of cooperation, that shares the booty: a million bucks. You see the tension, right? The drama-generating torque? These are lone wolves, alpha personalities, rugged individualists, huge pains in the American ass, and they must work together, *be* together, in a classic Sartrean hell-cell of a reality-TV situation.

Alaska seems to be a perfect place for all of this to go down—the still-open, still-wild, burning-and-freezing American frontier.

IT'S DIFFERENT NOW, watching reality TV. Years ago, pre-everything, on a flight out of Salt Lake City, I sat next to a man who had been on one of those construction reality shows—about tiny houses, I think. "I'll tell you one thing," he said to me as we popped open our second beer. "It's all made-up. Everything that happens in the show. It's complete bullshit." At the time, I didn't really believe him. I didn't want to, so happily and beerily invested was I in the narrative tropes of reality TV: the villain, the meltdown, the redemption. But now, post-everything, we distrust narrative. So when plot enters a reality show, when story starts to happen, we think, *Yeah, right*.

In the case of *Outlast*, however, I buy it. When one of the ad hoc teams abruptly goes feral and starts wrecking the campsites of its rivals, stealing sleeping bags, and so on, that feels real to me. I do not sense the hand of the producer. Or rather, I sense the producer's glee at how fucked-up everything is getting, at how readily it's all reverting to a state of nature. Isn't this the secret agenda of all reality shows: to become the Stanford Prison Experiment? And *Outlast* has the characters. Team Alpha, the rogue team in question, is three people: Jill, who has all the evil ideas; Justin, slashing tarps and twiddling the ends of his Mephistophelian mustache; and Amber, with her eyes of wolfish clarity, who aids and abets. They really run riot, this lot. They accelerate into a space of no compassion at all: "This isn't about survival!" protests one of their appalled and out-gamed victims. "It's about who's the fucking *meanest*." Now, doesn't that have the ring of truth, the authentic clang of 2023? In lockdown, we watched *Alone*; now we're dealing with one another again, and we're watching *Outlast*.

The greatest, boldest, craziest aloner of them all was Timothy Treadwell, cracked wilderness king and director of his own bootleg reality show. You've seen *Grizzly Man*, I hope—one of the director Werner Herzog's masterpieces, and a prime text of the Alaskan sublime. Treadwell is the protagonist: the hero, why not? He filmed himself, like the contestants on *Alone*; he asserted himself in hard company, like the contestants on *Outlast*. Only the company was bears, not people: the roaming grizzlies of Alaska's Katmai National Park, among whom Treadwell camped for 13 summers. Bear-loving, bear-obsessed, eventually eaten by a bear, Treadwell never muttered about protein—at least not in the footage I've seen. He was too busy watching the bears play their own game of survival. And he entered the game. He was with them; cherishing them; backing them down; giving them names; talking to them in eerie, rapturous singsong, half shaman, half preschool teacher. *Don't you do that …* don't *you do that … It's okay, I love you, I love you.* Next to this strange ecstasy, Herzog's German-accented voice-overs are cosmic deadpan. "In all the faces of all the bears that Treadwell ever filmed, I discover no kinship, no understanding, no mercy. I see only the overwhelming indifference of nature."

How nature feels about us, that's the great imponderable. That's somewhere under all these shows. The wilderness gapes. The wilderness crackles. Trekking across it, trying to make a home in it, aloneing, outlasting, or diving profanely into its mysteries, we never quite get the answer to our question: Are we strangers in this world, or not? *A*

James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



BOOKS

Who Was Cleopatra's Daughter?

The perils of searching for feminist heroes in antiquity

By Mary Beard

Hovering in the background of ancient history's headlines is King Juba II—writer, explorer, and ruler of Mauretania, the Roman satellite kingdom in North Africa, for almost 50 years until his death in the early 20s A.D. His skin color is debated (was he light brown? or black?). All we know is that his father was a Berber king in North Africa who supported the wrong side in the civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey, forged a suicide pact with an ally, and left his infant son to be carted back to Rome and displayed in Caesar's triumphal victory parade in 46 B.C. The child was then brought up within Rome's ruling family as something between honored guest, lodger, and prisoner. When he was about 25, the emperor, Augustus, sent him back to North Africa to be king of Mauretania, which extended from modern Algeria west to the Atlantic coast, a buffer state between the Roman empire and the peoples to the south.

The new king seems to have divided his time among the battlefield (there was plenty of "buffering" to be done), the library, and research trips to investigate the flora and fauna of the region. Juba had started writing in Rome (including a history of the city and at least eight volumes on the subject of painting), and in North Africa he produced weighty studies of the region's geography, history, and culture. He argued, no doubt with a degree of local pride, that the source of the Nile lay in Mauretania, and gave detailed descriptions of the North African elephant. None of his work survives complete, but we have more than 100 extracts quoted by later writers.

Juba's scientific contributions are his greatest legacy to the modern world. He is not only our best witness to that now-extinct elephant; drawing on his doctor's name (Antonius Euphorbus), he christened the group of plants still known as *Euphorbia* (the red-leaved poinsettia is the most easily recognized of these), which was discovered on one of his expeditions into the Atlas Mountains. Chances are he's behind the name of the Canary Islands too, taken from the big dogs (*canes*, in Latin) found on one of his expeditions there.

More generally, Juba opens our eyes to all kinds of different perspectives on how Roman power worked. In Rome itself, for example, the royal residences served as a boardinghouse and school for foreign royalty (several other princes and princesses also lodged there). Juba's Mauretania was one of many "friendly" border kingdoms, where Rome could exert sway from a distance and establish a broad, easily defensible frontier zone—quite unlike the single line usually marked on our modern maps of the empire.

Juba also raises big questions about cultural and ethnic diversity in the Roman world. He was brought to Rome as a baby and reared there. Did he think of himself as Roman or as foreign? Or did he combine those different identities, and adapt them to different circumstances? Is his treatise on North Africa, *Libyka*, an attempt to define a specifically African history and culture, of which he was a part? Or was it a weapon of Roman imperial control? Most modern empires have used knowledge as a form of power. Systems of geography, history, and even the classification of plants and animals have been imposed as a subtle means of domination. In the ancient world as well, to map meant to own. The 40 or so extracts or paraphrases from *Libyka* that have come down to us, many of them very brief, were quoted for the scientific "facts" they contain, and give no clue to the underlying ideology.

How did Cleopatra junior, the daughter of the most famous female enemy Rome ever had, become the wife of a Roman vassal king?

BUT IN RECENT YEARS, interest in Juba has been overshadowed by interest in his wife, who went with him from Rome to be queen of Mauretania, and to set up a court in what is now Cherchell, in modern Algeria, a town they called Caesarea. Unlike her husband, she still has an instantly recognizable name: Cleopatra Selene ("the moon"), the only daughter of one of the most notorious, glamorized, and in the end spectacularly unsuccessful couples in Western history: Cleopatra VII, queen of Egypt, and the Roman Mark Antony. She raises just as many questions as Juba does.

How did Cleopatra junior, the daughter of the most famous female enemy Rome ever had, become the wife of a Roman vassal king? How did she negotiate her relationship between the Egypt of her mother and the Rome of her father? And what were her political and cultural ambitions? How did you see yourself if your mother was Cleopatra? A string of contemporary novels and several careful historical analyses (notably by Duane W. Roller) have tried to tell her story from her point of view. The same goal drives a new full-length biography, *Cleopatra's Daughter: Egyptian Princess, Roman Prisoner, African Queen*, by Jane Draycott, a lecturer in ancient history at the University of Glasgow.

In some ways, Cleopatra's career mirrors her husband's. She was born in Alexandria around 40 B.C. Antony was a largely absent father, but when his daughter was about 6, he made the extravagant, though mostly empty, gesture of declaring her queen of Crete and Cyrenaica (on the North African coast), territories that he had no authority to give away. When she was 10 or so, her parents—defeated in their war against Octavian, the future Emperor Augustus—both killed themselves, and she and her brothers, like Juba before them, were taken to Rome, where they appeared in a triumphal procession staged by her parents' enemies in 29 B.C. According to one ancient account, she and her twin brother, Alexander Helios ("the sun"), walked in the parade next to an effigy of their dead mother. Draycott evokes the experience of being put on show this way by comparing it to the scene of Princes William and Harry walking in procession through London next to their mother's coffin.

The young Cleopatra grew up in the residence of the imperial family in Rome, before marrying (or being married off to) Juba and moving with him to Mauretania. There she had at least one son, Ptolemaios, who followed his father onto the throne, but came to a nasty end under the Roman Emperor Caligula in 40 A.D. Cleopatra Selene's own death, commemorated in a surviving poem, has usually been dated to 5 A.D. thanks to an allusion to a lunar eclipse known to have happened that year.

That is the sum of what we know about Cleopatra Selene from ancient written accounts. With scrupulous honesty, Draycott assembles all the references to

her in a short appendix, fewer than five full pages long. She hints that we might know more about her if she had been a rebel against the power of Rome, like Boudicca or Zenobia; Cleopatra Selene, Draycott writes, "succeeded quietly rather than failed loudly." But as it is, decades of her life—most of her adult years, in fact—go completely unrecorded. All we know for sure of her time in Mauretania is that she had a son. Even less information exists about other key characters in her story. Her twin, for example, simply disappears from view after his arrival in Rome. Did he get lucky and find a nice place for a comfortable exile, out of the public eye? Or did he simply die? Draycott enigmatically writes that he "failed to adapt to his change in circumstances." Others have suspected murder.

The result is a wonderful vacuum for fiction writers to fill. Cleopatra Selene has been given a steamy, star-crossed love affair with Juba in Rome, before the two head off to build a new life in Mauretania. Elsewhere we can read high-stakes political drama. In a trilogy by Stephanie Dray, for example, the young princess is some kind of proto–Egyptian nationalist, battling to recapture the status of her mother, married to Juba against her will, and raped by Emperor Augustus with the active connivance of his wife Livia (echoing the report in one ancient biography that Livia used to groom virgins for her husband). But telling her story in nonfiction, vividly or not, is harder.

Draycott, too, wants to see Cleopatra Selene as a "powerful ruler in her own right," trying to "fuse her past and present" in a multicultural monarchy that was "new and distinctive in the Roman Empire." In the absence of any written evidence for that, she turns to archaeology and the material remains from Mauretania and elsewhere. There have been many attempts over the past few decades to find the face of young Cleopatra on cameos and silver dishes. She has even (implausibly) been identified as one of the figures, along with her son, in the procession sculpted on one side of Augustus's famous Altar of Peace, in Rome. But only on Mauretanian coins do we have images of her that are actually named. One coin depicts Juba on one side, with the title (in Latin) "King Juba, son of King Juba," and on the other Cleopatra Selene, with the title (in Greek) "Queen Cleopatra, daughter of Cleopatra." Another coin does not feature Juba at all, but has her head on one side and a crocodile on the other, with the title "Queen Cleopatra" written on both.

For Draycott, these are among the most clinching pieces of evidence for her view of the commanding queen: They show Cleopatra Selene as, at the least, an equal co-ruler alongside her husband, with the authority to mint coins. And they show her using her ancestry and symbols of Egypt as a mark of power. Draycott also imagines her having a hand in Juba's *Libyka* and in the royal couple's "project of laying claim to the entire continent," which is how she boldly interprets that work.

All of that is possible. But a skeptic might object that having your head on a coin does not indicate that you had the authority to mint (plenty of Roman empresses with no such authority appeared on coins); that *queen* can just as well mean "wife of the king" as "regnant ruler"; and that every ancient account treats Juba as having sole power. To be sure, that might be because the writers could not accept that a woman was in joint command—but they might also have known what they were talking about. Besides, giving your new capital the aggressively Roman name of Caesarea ("Emperorville") is an odd choice for a couple with multicultural, almost Pan-African aspirations.

CLEOPATRA'S DAUGHTER: EGYPTIAN PRINCESS, ROMAN PRISONER, AFRICAN QUEEN

Jane Draycott

LIVERIGHT

THE INTERPRETIVE debates about what scant evidence there is can go round and round. The fact that I am skeptical does not mean Draycott is wrong. But the arguments point beyond the story of Cleopatra Selene and Juba to the more general problems inherent in undertaking modern biographies of ancient subjects, and raise the question of why we are writing such books. The young Cleopatra may be an extreme case, but there is no character in antiquity (with the possible exception of Cicero, the first-century-B.C. Roman orator, theorist, wit, and letter-writer) for whom we have enough information to create a biography that satisfies the expectations of modern readers and publishers.

To turn written evidence that fills fewer than five pages into a 256-page account, Draycott uses well-established tactics. She offers a lot of fascinating context and background to add bulk. Her chapters on the culture of Alexandria and on Egyptomania in Rome are excellent and accessible, but they help us relatively little with Cleopatra Selene herself. She projects a few familiar modern anxieties onto her ancient characters: She wonders at one point about Juba's "midlife crisis." And to bolster what is necessarily a fragile narrative, she liberally sprinkles *would have*s and *must have*s through her text, occasionally up to five or six times on a single page (she "would have been highly educated," "it would have been terrifying," and so on). Most modern biographies of ancient Romans, when they don't simply assume that we know things we do not, adopt this "would have" brand of storytelling. It makes for an awkward narrative.

Draycott is well aware of these issues. She starts the book by asking, "How does one dare to attempt to write a biography of any ancient historical figure?" But she has powerful reasons for trying to reconstruct Cleopatra Selene's life story. As she explains,

she wants young women of color to be able to identify with the queen, whom she sees as an inspiring model for them and for the rest of us—a figure who "successfully wielded power … when women were marginalised," and when she herself was an outsider in so many ways.

I hope that I am as keen as Draycott that classics as a discipline should find ways of engaging with diverse communities and also being enriched by them. And she is admirably judicious on the controversial question of whether Cleopatra, mother or daughter, was in our terms Black (answer: We don't know). But I am suspicious in general of finding exemplary figures for our own times in the distant past. After all, one of the things that we now rightly find problematic about the 19th-century study of classics was that elite white men did claim to see themselves in the ancient world, and they presented antiquity in their own image, not as a strange and different place. It doesn't help us understand either the ancient world or ourselves to supplant one set of such role models with another. More than that, to hold up as an ideal for today's young people a woman about whom we know next to nothing is to promote fantasy over fact.

Historians should certainly try to uncover the forgotten women of classical antiquity, and to spot those whose strength has been overlooked. Sometimes that has been done with great success. The ancient account, for instance, of the martyrdom of Perpetua—a young Christian woman put to death in North Africa in the early third century A.D.—has been given new life in the past few decades, after centuries of being scarcely noticed by historians. The neglect was extraordinary, given that Perpetua left us her own words, preserved in her prison diaries, describing her trial and imprisonment: a rare example of a woman's voice surviving from the Roman empire.

But understanding how women in the ancient world were silenced is equally important. What social mechanisms and cultural assumptions help explain why those who may have claimed some power were overlooked—or, alternatively, demonized? Cleopatra senior is a good case of vilification, and so is Augustus's wife Livia, who was blamed for almost every death within the palace walls. In the end, for the historian, unearthing the reasons we know so little about Cleopatra Selene—probing into who wrote her out of the story, and how—is a more instructive project than reinventing her to fit our own template of power. My question is, why do we know more about Juba's elephants than about his wife? *A*

Mary Beard is a classicist. Her new book, Emperor of Rome*, will be published in the fall.*

Disaster

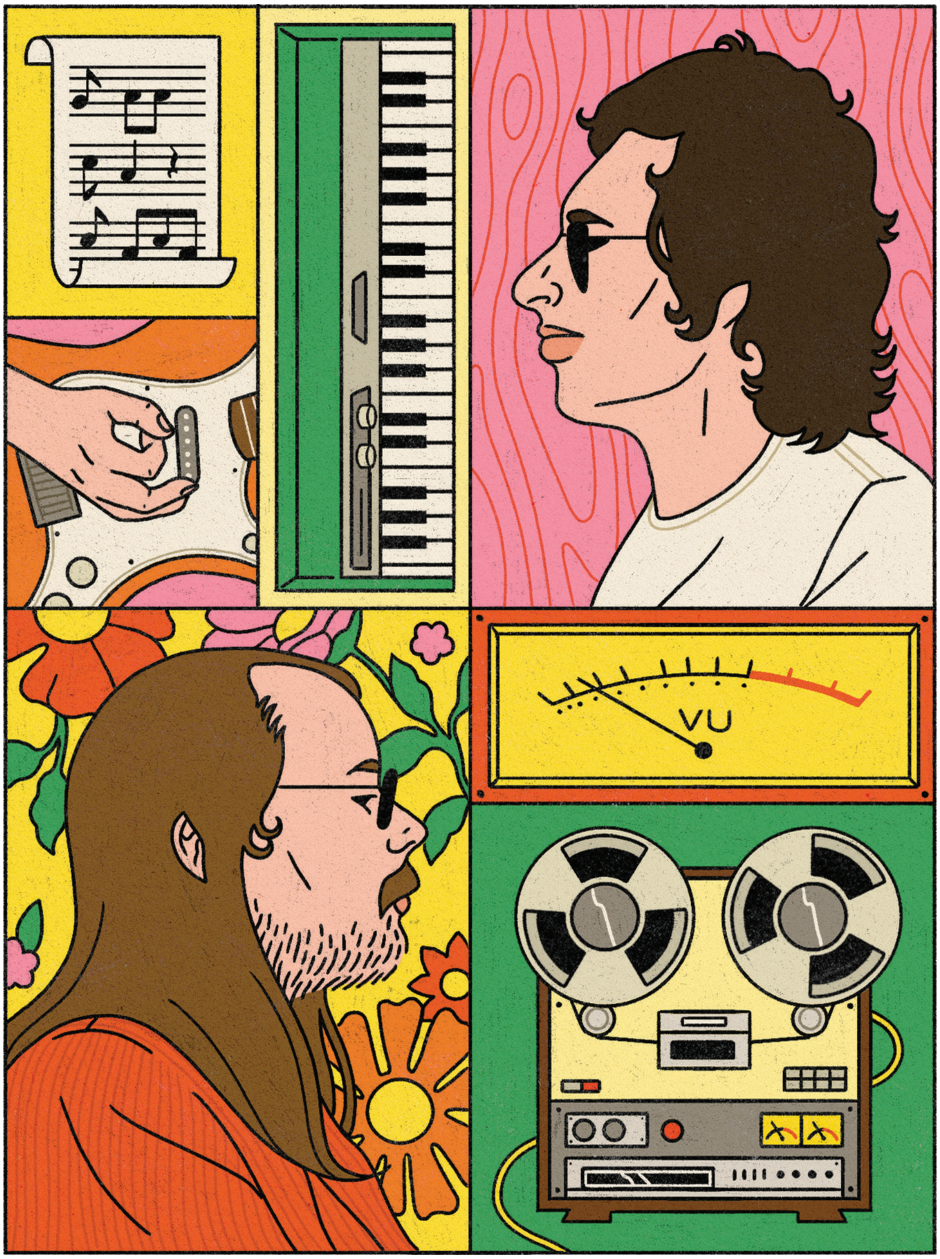
By Tsitsi Jaji

YouTube proves me right. There is a place
called Greenland—turquoise warped, whiter
than white. He wants to see a glacier—
not too long, not too much information.
Breakfast fare for a 4-year-old.

The diagram stirs into motion: See how
water burrows back to the ocean's primal
warmth. It's taken forever, but the last
kilometers rush home. I tell him
this is why we are green activists.

He hugs the loving tree, ever literal.
My first betrayal was birthing him.
Now I stretch the truth: dig dirt,
taps tight, lights off—about as good
as neem oil for cabbage worms.

Tsitsi Jaji was born in Nyadire, Zimbabwe.
Her most recent collection is Mother Tongues.



BOOKS

Surrender to Steely Dan

How the insufferably perfectionist duo captured the hearts of a new generation of listeners

By Jack Hamilton

The first time I ever heard Steely Dan's music wasn't on a Steely Dan recording. It was the mid-1990s, and I was in my early teens, listening to a cassette of De La Soul's *3 Feet High and Rising* (1989), a hip-hop album that blew my young mind. I wanted to hear one track in particular, a love song called "Eye Know," over and over again: It was so effervescent, so totally joyful. A few years later, I learned that "Eye Know" was constructed around a sample of "Peg," the fourth track of Steely Dan's 1977 album, *Aja*. Meanwhile, another *Aja* sample was making the rounds in hip-hop: The opening track, "Black Cow," was the bedrock for Lord Tariq and Peter Gunz's 1997 rap-radio blockbuster, "Deja Vu (Uptown Baby)."

Music obsessive that I was, this confounded me. Steely Dan—the musical handle of the songwriting pair Walter Becker and Donald Fagen—was considered toxically uncool. Steely Dan was also in the midst of a decades-long hiatus from releasing new studio albums, after putting out seven from 1972 to 1980. I knew the band's 1974 hit, "Rikki Don't Lose That Number," a steady presence on classic-rock radio, but I had trouble wrapping my head and ears around it. The guy singing in a plaintive, nasal voice seemed pretty sure that Rikki was, in fact, going to lose that number; every time he sang "And you could have a change of hea-a-art," a gnarled run of notes followed that sounded oddly aggressive. I recognized the bass piano line from Horace Silver's bossa-jazz chestnut "Song for My Father," because I'd played it in my own jazz-piano lessons. But what was it doing in a pop song? "Rikki"'s strange combination of jazz, rock, and R&B, alchemized into a near-frictionless sonic slickness, seemed antithetical to the grunge-era ethos of anti-establishment, heart-on-your-sleeve authenticity.

ILLUSTRATION BY NADA HAYEK

In hindsight, Steely Dan's Zelig-like presence in sample-based hip-hop looks like a harbinger of the band's current renaissance: A duo that was one of the most polarizing acts in rock even at its peak, in the 1970s, has lately acquired an army of new fans, many of them remarkably young. Listeners born well after the group made its best-known work are especially ardent, as social-media accounts with names like "Good Steely Dan Takes" and "People Dancing to Steely Dan" (both of which have tens of thousands of followers) attest. Steely Dan memes steadily proliferate on Twitter and Instagram and among the massively popular r/SteelyDan Reddit community. In 2019, the music publication *Pitchfork*—which had reviewed the band's 2000 comeback album, *Two Against Nature*, with cooler-than-thou contempt and given it a score of 1.6 out of 10—published retrospective reviews of five of the band's most esteemed studio albums; all of them were rated 8.3 or higher.

THE POP-CULTURE CRITIC Alex Pappademas (who wrote one of those *Pitchfork* reviews) dives into this "Danaissance" in *Quantum Criminals: Ramblers, Wild Gamblers, and Other Sole Survivors From the Songs of Steely Dan*, a collection of illustrated essays dreamed up in collaboration with the artist Joan LeMay. The book doesn't aspire to be a history of the band's vicissitudes or a conventional march through its discography. Instead, Pappademas offers a lively series of ruminations about individual songs, loosely pegged to the characters who populate those songs and who are rendered in playfully detailed and colorful portraits by LeMay. The result is both a celebration and an artifact of the current Steely Dan moment.

Pappademas tries out several theories to explain the Danaissance's timing. The most compelling of them is the idea that their songs, full of gallows humor and wry disillusionment, resonate with a generation raised on crashing economies and a climate crisis. "Donald and Walter's songs of monied decadence, druggy disconnection, slow-motion apocalypse, and self-destructive escapism seemed satirically extreme way back when; now they seem prophetic," he writes. "We are all Steely Dan characters now."

The truth is, Steely Dan's trajectory has never been readily explicable. The band's success defied rock-and-roll logic at every turn, starting with the fact that it wasn't really a band. Steely Dan was the invention of two young men who had met at Bard College in the late 1960s and were obsessed with Bob Dylan and Charlie Parker in equal measure. Shortly after leaving Bard, Fagen and Becker moved to Los Angeles to become in-house songwriters for ABC/Dunhill Records. When their compositions proved too offbeat for other ABC artists to perform, the pair began to record the work themselves, with Fagen on keyboards and vocals, Becker on bass, and a roster of top-flight rock players rounding out the proceedings. ABC released Steely Dan's first album, *Can't Buy a Thrill*, in 1972. It sold 500,000 copies within weeks and spun off two hit singles, "Do It Again" and "Reelin' in the Years."

Steely Dan's success defied rock-and-roll logic at every turn, starting with the fact that it wasn't really a band.

If *Can't Buy a Thrill* had been the only album Steely Dan ever made, we would remember the band very differently. Fagen doesn't even sing lead on three of the album's tracks, and by Steely Dan's later standards, the music is almost shaggy, full of jangling guitars and earworm radio-pop flourishes. It's steeped in folk rock, Beatles-esque chord changes, and '60s-vintage soul grooves. No other Steely Dan album feels quite so eager to be liked.

When Fagen and Becker followed up a year later with *Countdown to Ecstasy*, their true sound took shape. Their second album is full of dazzling rhythms, sophisticated harmonic structures, lyrics that are spiky and evocative and seethe with mordant disaffection. "Will you still have a song to sing when the razor boy comes and takes your fancy things away?" Fagen croons on "Razor Boy," so mellifluously that you can easily miss that he's singing about death.

After *Countdown*, nearly every aspect of Fagen and Becker's project felt like a deliberate flouting of rock conventions. No sooner had 1974's *Pretzel Logic*, propelled by the popularity of "Rikki Don't Lose That Number," become their biggest-selling album yet than Fagen and Becker decided to stop touring and reimagine Steely Dan as a purely studio-based entity. The duo proceeded to host a churn of crack session musicians, summoned to perform—at near-impossible levels of exactitude—compositions that grew ever more ambitious and technically demanding. Working with the producer Gary Katz and the engineer Roger Nichols, Fagen and Becker were in pursuit of perfect tones, perfect textures, perfect sounds. Steely Dan released two more studio albums—*Katy Lied* (1975) and *The Royal Scam* (1976)—before *Aja* in 1977, and *Gaucho* three years later. And then Steely Dan didn't make another studio album for 20 years.

LIKE JAZZ GREATS of earlier generations, Fagen and Becker composed music full of dense harmonic structures and intricate arrangements. They openly worshipped at the feet of those masters: The only cover they ever recorded was a reverently faithful rendition of Duke Ellington's 1926 classic "East St. Louis Toodle-oo," which appeared on *Pretzel Logic*. (In case anyone missed it, the song was also included on Steely Dan's 1978 *Greatest Hits* album.)

They wrote surreal, scabrously witty songs about washed-up hipsters and failed threesomes, the incongruity of their buffed-to-a-shine sound

adding to the humor. Their lyrics name-dropped a wide range of figures, among them the avant-garde mezzo-soprano Cathy Berberian; the Queen of Soul, Aretha Franklin; and Napoleon. They also wrote about unforgettably strange fictional figures who went by names like "Felonious," "Kid Charlemagne," and "Deacon Blues." In sharp and funny chapters, Pappademas riffs on this cast of characters in ways that capture the band's cultural context and musical debts. The inspiration for "Kid Charlemagne," for example, is the hippie "Acid King" Augustus Owsley Stanley III—the principal LSD chemist for the Merry Pranksters and the Grateful Dead (as well as the Dead's longtime soundman)—whose decline the song recounts. "Alone without a community of revolutionaries around him," Pappademas writes, "he's now just another criminal on the run."

Steely Dan's music posed a question: Was it possible to be an ironist and a perfectionist simultaneously? Was taking rock and roll this seriously a high-concept joke, or the only way to unlock the music's full creative potential? Or had Steely Dan somehow come up with a blend of both, a virtuosic balancing act of scathing satire and fervent earnestness? At one point, Pappademas describes Fagen and Becker as "cynical about their own cynicism," a phrase that hints at the fierce idealism that runs beneath the surface of even their iciest music.

Such contradictions made Steely Dan an anomalous presence in the landscape of 1970s rock. The band-that-wasn't-really-a-band was devoid of the phallic swagger of, say, Led Zeppelin or Aerosmith. While Bruce Springsteen was redefining heroic authenticity and gracing the covers of national magazines, Fagen and Becker retreated behind their retinue of characters. Steely Dan's ever-changing lineups deprived the band's public of the personality-driven soap operas that fans thrilled to in groups such as the Rolling Stones and Fleetwood Mac. The pair's refusal to tour stood out as arena rock became a massive business; Fagen and Becker never even appeared on one of their studio-album covers. At a time when rock stardom was synonymous with being cool, the two of them seemed uninterested in being rock stars and completely indifferent to being cool.

***AJA*'S SUCCESS** was unusual, even for this unusual band. Released just weeks after Elvis Presley died and in the middle of the year that punk broke, the album became the biggest commercial hit of Steely Dan's career, peaking at No. 3 on the *Billboard* album chart. Fans debate whether it's the best Steely Dan album, but it's certainly the *quintessential* Steely Dan album. An extraordinary fusion of styles filtered through the duo's explosively ambitious songcraft and sonic architecture, *Aja* features more than 30 credited musicians, a who's who of the world's top jazz, rock, and R&B session players.

An old joke about Steely Dan's reliance on studio musicians has it that Fagen and Becker were writing music so difficult that they couldn't even play it themselves. This isn't true: Both were terrific instrumentalists and can be heard all over *Aja*. Still, the deployment of so many hired guns was one of the most controversial and misunderstood aspects of their endeavor; detractors, viewing it as proof of prefab inauthenticity, disparaged Steely Dan as essentially a factory dedicated to turning out the world's most finely tuned musical product.

But enlisting studio players, far from an abdication of artistic vision, was a fanatical assertion of Fagen and Becker's vision. The fantasy that rock-and-roll bands are democracies—melting pots of individual contributions and sensibilities, wholes greater than the sum of their parts—is deep-seated and attractive. By *Aja*, Steely Dan had dispensed with such notions (if its founders had ever embraced them): Fagen and Becker were the bosses, and everyone else was an employee. To use a famous example, the pair reportedly brought in as many as eight different guitarists to try playing the roughly 25-second guitar solo on "Peg." (Jay Graydon finally got it, after what he later recalled as "four, five hours" of takes.)

QUANTUM CRIMINALS: RAMBLERS, WILD GAMBLERS, AND OTHER SOLE SURVIVORS FROM THE SONGS OF STEELY DAN

Alex Pappademas and Joan LeMay

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS

From one angle, this looks like tyrannical micromanagement; from another, it looks like the sort of uncompromising rigor and sacrifice—of time, money, and other people's individual talent—in the service of a relentless aspiration that certain great art requires. In the case of Steely Dan, listeners can find themselves under unforgiving pressure too: Insistent about making music entirely on their terms, Fagen and Becker deliver a sound defined by calculating precision, one that offers little of the visceral thrill of impulsivity that many fans expect from rock music. It's a listening experience that some will find deeply alienating, others endlessly alluring.

"There are artists who don't work this way," Pappademas writes, "but none of them have made 'Peg,'" a song that he extols in terms that distill the Steely Dan aesthetic: It's "a hundred layers carefully positioned to create the illusion of casual cohesion, a whole ecosystem arrayed in a shape as sleek as a surfboard." As detail-oriented as his muses, Pappademas dedicates an entire paragraph in an essay about "Show Biz Kids"—a song he identifies as the very first rock song "about being afraid of people younger and cooler than you"—to a four-bar phrase that occurs three minutes and 49 seconds in and lasts about seven seconds itself. The fleeting moment might seem tossed-off: The guitar drops out and we're left with a roiling marimba



*Steely Dan's Walter Becker (*second from left*) and Donald Fagen (*far right*) in 1973; others, from left to right: Jim Hodder, Denny Dias, and Jeff "Skunk" Baxter*

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES / GETTY

and Fagen intoning a profane line about Hollywood scions ("They don't give a fuck about anybody else"). But Pappademas, fastening on that small but crucial arrangement choice, pronounces it "the coolest and therefore most important part of the song." "Yes!" I exclaimed, instantly appreciating his insight.

Fully accounting for the collective "Yes!" that is now greeting Steely Dan may be hopeless, but the lineage of that yes is rich and suggestive. Decades ago, young hip-hop artists stumbled upon Steely Dan because of the band's popularity among a slightly older generation of Black listeners—De La Soul's Kelvin Mercer (also known as Posdnuos) has recalled first listening to "Peg" as a child with his father, years before the sample found its way onto *3 Feet High and Rising*. Now, as a new generation of listeners discovers the band, the sonic and stylistic polish of Steely Dan that seemed so divisive in the '70s—and in the '90s—is evidently no longer such a deterrent. *Slick* doesn't carry the sting that it used to.

For those weary of the "rockism"-versus-"poptimism" debates of the past couple of decades—and who isn't?—Steely Dan offers a welcome escape from the reductive opposition between rock as Promethean self-expression and pop as a big-tent pleasure center. The band didn't mind being dismissed by the most doctrinaire rock partisans: "soulless, and by its calculated nature antithetical to what rock should be," as a *Rolling Stone* review of *Aja* summed up the brief against them. At the same time, Steely Dan's music is unapologetically snobbish, flouting the "everything is great" ethos of extreme poptimism.

A band that charts an idiosyncratic path ends up acquiring an eclectic audience, this one united by a tenacious devotion to the work of a pair of artists who were themselves nothing if not devoted. When I became a full-fledged Steely Dan fan in my 20s, I found the depth of care and attention in Fagen and Becker's music deeply moving, even romantic. If the lyrics were often cynical, everything else felt like the opposite, and the tensions held in Steely Dan's sound spoke to, well, my soul. I'm glad to know I have new company. *A*

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BOOKS

Writing in the Ruins

The German writer Jenny Erpenbeck cuts through dogma, fractures time, and preserves rubble.

By Gal Beckerman



KATHARINA BEHLING

If you grew up in East Germany, a country whose national anthem began, "Resurrected from the ruins, faces toward the future turned," you might find a landscape covered in shards to be almost natural—the broken past coexisting alongside an emerging world of concrete and glass. Those ruins might even inspire an unabashed love, as they have in the German novelist Jenny Erpenbeck, born in that now-extinct country in 1967. "Steel girders. Charred beams. Walls with nothing behind them," she writes in an essay. "Rooms where the rain falls on dead pigeons because there isn't a roof overhead." These are a few of her favorite things.

For Erpenbeck, who ranks among Germany's most acclaimed writers (and is frequently mentioned as a future Nobel contender), this love comes with an ethic, one that suffuses her fiction. In an essay called "Homesick for Sadness," included in *Not a Novel: A Memoir in Pieces*, she describes how she felt when she learned that her GDR-era elementary school, which had been abandoned and left to crumble in the middle of Berlin, was finally being demolished. Her grief had two stages. When the school began to decompose, she felt the personal loss of a place that had once housed her childhood. But with the arrival of bulldozers to clear the rubble and erase the remnants, she was overcome by "grief for the disappearance of a place that was such a visible injury, for the disappearance of sick or disturbed things or spaces, which offer proof that the present can't *make its peace* with everything."

This is a very postwar-German sentiment, and Erpenbeck is a very postwar-German writer. In her professed "love of dirt," she follows W. G. Sebald and Günter Grass. For these authors, history is not compressed strata; layers of the

ILLUSTRATION BY MATTHIEU BOUREL

past surround them, a constant atmosphere, felt and seen anytime they look around. Hans, the middle-aged East German author who is one of the main characters in Erpenbeck's new novel, *Kairos*, describes the East Berlin of the 1980s very much in his author's terms: Inhabiting a place where the past is visible everywhere, exposed and rotting, he concludes that "this devastation was the truth."

It's a truth that made Sebald digressively meditative and Grass revel in absurdity. Erpenbeck is symphonic. In fact, after the Berlin Wall fell, and before she turned to writing, she worked in an opera house in Graz, Austria. The experience shows. Her novels exist on epic planes. Erpenbeck repeatedly constructs stories that span generations, letting history leak into and through them. She relies on leitmotifs—themes, objects, exact phrases recur through the narratives over time and space. In America, our fights about history lately come out of a desire to flatten it, to clear the rubble, to find a clean narrative: 1619 or 1776? Erpenbeck ponders her own messy German birthright and sees a landscape of ruins to play in.

BORN INTO a family of East German intellectuals and authors, Erpenbeck published her first book in 1999, a novella called *The Old Child*. A series of dark, fairy-tale-inflected stories followed over the next decade. In 2008 came *Heimsuchung* (which translates literally as "home searching" but was given the anemic title *Visitation* when it appeared in English in 2010). Her first truly symphonic work, it covers a century, yet never leaves the same patch of earth, a lake house in Brandenburg, not far from Berlin. In brief, impressionistic chapters, she writes of the lives that were connected to the house—among them, those of its Nazi architect and the Russian soldier who comes upon the place in 1945, after that architect has fled. The 20th century shakes its grand walls and tracks mud across its floors.

Erpenbeck's identity as a novelist, she has written, is inseparable from having lived through the overnight collapse of East Germany.

In her next book, *The End of Days* (2012), Erpenbeck again plays with the passage of time, shifting her attention from what is constant to the fungibility of human lives. Here, too, she deploys a conceit that, in lesser hands, could feel like a gimmick: The existence of one woman unspools in its pages, though she dies five times, each successive life picking up where the previous one ended, rescued by a slight shift of fate. The novel begins at the turn of the 20th century in a small Galician town, where a Jewish mother is mourning the death of her eight-month-old baby; misfortunes follow for the family. An "Intermezzo" then pauses the story, time folds back on itself, and the parents save their infant through the simple act of dashing snow on her chest so that she begins to breathe again. In the last of three more interludes, the now-elderly woman, living in a reunified Germany, is resurrected after a fall down the stairs of her building; she goes on to die peacefully in her bed at the age of 90. Accident and possibility are never far apart.

Erpenbeck's writing is often described as sparse or unadorned. On a sentence level, it can be. But she stacks these simple sentences one on top of another, giving the economy of her prose a grandeur (rendered lyrically into English by Susan Bernofsky, who translated all of her previous works of fiction). One 242-word sentence in *The End of Days* imagines the old woman's death, beginning by conjuring "all the human beings walking upon the earth at this moment, along with their falling down, their jumping, crawling, and sleeping at this very moment," and eventually arriving at the woman's son stroking her back, "feeling her bones beneath her thin, old skin, bones that will soon be laid bare."

Most of the characters in these two novels are nameless. What grounds the books are locations and material objects—the Brandenburg lake house; a volume of Goethe, nicked by a stone thrown through a window in a pogrom at the start of the century and then sitting in a pawnshop at its end. As beautiful as the novels are, a deep sadness permeates them, and not just because they inevitably remind us of our individual smallness set against the relentless march of time; some essential humanness is lost within these transhistorical narratives. The characters seem to float by, never unfolding in their particularity.

But in her third and greatest novel so far, *Go, Went, Gone* (2015), Erpenbeck creates a fully fleshed-out character in a story that could not be more immediate in its concerns. In contemporary Berlin, a newly retired professor of classical philology named Richard takes an interest in a group of African refugees who have set up an encampment to protest their status: They are seeking asylum and work in Germany. Richard's life becomes enmeshed in theirs, as curiosity turns into affection and care and even something like identification. He was born and lived in East Germany until, abruptly, it was no more, and the dislocation of these men reverberates with him. "Speaking about the actual nature of time is something he can probably do best in conversation with those who have fallen out of it," Richard reflects.

Novelists who consciously try to write about "issues" don't have a great track record, but Erpenbeck's ability to illuminate history's layers serves her well here. The African men and their stories are specific—the refugees recount their ordeals in their own words—but they also echo Western myths and heroes. Their journeys on the sea, swept away from home, remind Richard of Homeric epics. In

connecting the refugees to an ongoing human story of war and flight and the appearance and disappearance of borders, Erpenbeck isn't pulling back and away: She's attempting to dislodge the illusion that Germany's present has nothing to do with these Africans' stories. By the end of the novel, Richard has turned his home into an asylum.

ERPENBECK'S IDENTITY as a novelist is inseparable, she has written, from having lived through the overnight collapse of East Germany: "Without this experience of transition, from one world to a very other one, I probably never would have started writing." What was "self-evident ceased to be self-evident," she has explained, and the shock of how quickly this happened, how quickly it could happen, has never left her. "From that moment on, my childhood belonged in a museum."

Erpenbeck also came to see what an intimate, intense island East Berlin had been, in no way an idyll, but to her a place of authenticity, unlike the new world "of pleasant aromas and smooth objects that fit comfortably in your hand," where "whatever was broken, whatever was flawed, was left in the blind spots, in the shadows." She misses the discarded society, in which past and future, destruction and creation were starkly juxtaposed, and every citizen was both victim and perpetrator to varying degrees. Her insistence on crunching time, her accordioning of history, is one of the ways that she's tried to return to it.

Erpenbeck's new book, *Kairos*, her most directly personal, brings her back to the last years of East Germany, where, in full operatic mode, she stages a love story amid the ruins. Hans, a mildly successful author in his early 50s, "took his first steps under Hitler," wore the uniform of the Hitler Jugend, and then found his place among East Germany's compromised cultural elite. When he meets Katharina, she is 19, born in 1967 (the same year as Erpenbeck), and six years after a wall divided not just her city, but her own family, in half. One summer night in 1986, these two catch sight of each other on a bus and, thunderstruck, are soon in Hans's apartment (which he shares with his wife and teenage son), tearing clothes off to the strains of Mozart's *Requiem*. Erpenbeck is not being subtle: Love and death are intermingling. And their enraptured thoughts, too, intermingle, almost comically distilling Erpenbeck's themes. "It will never be like this again, thinks Hans. It will always be this way, thinks Katharina."

If Hans and Katharina's experience together is an allegory, it is not a pretty one. As a condensed vision of life in the German Democratic Republic, their love is, even at its best, insular and obsessive. From the very beginning, they shut out the world and build up a private mythology, using rituals to construct a wall around their relationship. They celebrate the smallest anniversaries, making a totem of the 11th of every month, the day they first met, saving receipts of their meals. She follows his family on vacation, renting a room nearby. They retrace again and again the steps they took together in an East Berlin that feels here like the smallest of towns.

KAIROS

Jenny Erpenbeck, translated by Michael Hofmann

NEW DIRECTIONS

Soon their relationship curdles, becoming sadomasochistic, and when Katharina, working as a set designer in a town a short distance away, has a one-night stand with a man her age, it gets even uglier. Rather than leave her, Hans insists, Stasi-like, on an "investigation": "I can only do this work if you are totally honest: expose your diaries, your notebooks, everything you jotted down, all your letters." He emotionally abuses her for a couple of years, recording and sending her cassette tapes in which he berates her and fixates on her unfaithfulness; on her 21st birthday, he whips her with a riding crop.

This is not *Ostalgie* (a nostalgia for the East). Erpenbeck once showed off a wall in her apartment devoted to quotidian GDR artifacts to a reporter profiling her—a collage of milk cartons and bureaucratic forms and assorted other remnants of life in the old regime. But in the stifling world of *Kairos*, passion and intimacy are entangled with self-abasement and suspicion, and history crowds its way in too. She has written a story of lovers so many decades apart (they marvel that their birth years, '33 and '67, together equal 100) precisely so that she can encompass ruptures and their residue. Hans is still haunted by his family's complicity in the war. Katharina, a child of the Communist paradise, feels comfort in the confines of the Wall, and by the end of the book is thrust beyond them.

Erpenbeck also dramatizes the collision of East and West. In one of the novel's most striking scenes, Katharina gets permission for the first time to visit her grandmother in Cologne and while there walks into a sex shop. Until now, the prose has displayed Erpenbeck's signature restraint. But upon entering the store, Katharina is barraged with images of every position and orifice, and the reader is assaulted by a cascade of words for it all: "hairy or clean-shaven, wet, sullied, dripping, gleaming, stretching." The break from the grayness of East Berlin roils us as it does Katharina. "Excitement stabs her in the belly like a butcher's knife. Freedom down there is perpetrating a massacre, and she feels sick."

When the Wall is demolished, as we know it will be, it is as if a vacuum has been punctured. Time in the book speeds up. Whereas the first month of their relationship consumed some 90 pages, 1991 becomes 1992 over the course of a few pages. Katharina is

mostly released from Hans, but she also feels lost in a freedom that "will render obsolete and forgotten everything that is ephemeral," Erpenbeck writes. "The bread will taste different … Already the eastern districts have started to smell different."

For Katharina—as the reader has learned in the prologue—the novel is her revisiting of this history, instigated by the delivery of an archive many years later: A crying woman (presumably the wife of a now-dead Hans) leaves her with two cardboard boxes containing the material history of their long-past affair—postcards, photos, a lock of hair preserved in a matchbox. Katharina finds her own dusty suitcase filled with letters and diaries: what archivists call "flat product," she tells us. Ruins, Erpenbeck might say, containing the story of their brutal love and the last years of the GDR:

> A suitcase like that, cardboard boxes like that, full of middles and endings and beginnings, buried under decades' worth of dust; pages that were written to deceive alongside other pages that were striving for truth; things itemized, other things passed over, all lying together higgledy-piggledy; the contradictions and the denials, silent fury and mute adoration together in one envelope, in one folder; what is forgotten just as creased and yellowed as what, dimly or distinctly, one still remembers.

Erpenbeck's work is a reminder that novelists can treat history in ways that neither historians nor politicians ever could.

IN ERPENBECK, Germany has a rare national writer whose portrayals of a ruptured country and century are a reminder that novelists can treat history in ways that neither historians nor politicians ever could, cutting through dogma, fracturing time, preserving rubble. The novelistic challenge is daunting, but has also provoked inventive experiments in form in some recent American fiction. As I read and reread Erpenbeck's work, Richard McGuire's brilliant 2014 graphic novel, *Here*, came to mind. He pictures one spot on Earth—a corner of the living room in his childhood house in Perth Amboy, New Jersey—and all the history that took place there. The time span extends from the primordial past to the year 22175, with different moments of time intruding, tearing holes through any particular present. In a mustard-yellow version of the room in 1964, captured in one typical spread, a woman sits at a piano and three girls dance, one wearing polka dots in 1932, another doing a backbend in 1993, and a third pirouetting in a blue dress in 2014. It's an American palimpsest—a variation, in a minor key, of *Visitation*.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the contemporary fiction writers in this country who have lately tried to swallow history on a grander scale are those who have been personally attuned to the dissonances of our own national past: to slavery and emancipation, xenophobia and assimilation, fatalism and opportunity. In Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's 2021 novel, *The Love Songs of W. E. B. Du Bois*, the life of one Black woman, Ailey Pearl Garfield, living at the end of the 20th century (an aspiring historian, no less), provides the occasion to rewind to the swamps of colonial Georgia. The stories of her progenitors, who include enslaved and free Black people, as well as Scottish colonists, unfold alongside her own racial and identity crises. In Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* (2019), a couple, each embarked on a documentary project, set out with their two children on a road trip to the Southwest. He wants to find the traces of the Apache warriors who lived in the Chiricahua Mountains, and she is looking to record the stories of migrant children. As they make their way, the news from the border, coming over the radio, wafts out onto a landscape marked by earlier migrations and extinctions, and the parents and the children enact a drama that connects them to a long history of vulnerability and loss.

The incongruities and violent disjunctions of history are there in both novels, jumbled like an archive, visible in a family saga, and in the migrants' detritus that litters the Sonoran Desert. There is no narrative neatness here, no methodical sifting of all this dirt. What these American works do, what Erpenbeck does so well, is instead make room for a history that can't be reckoned with—a too-tidy phrase—but needs to be recognized and stirred up again and again.

"She cannot remember a time in her life when she didn't know that in Germany, death is not the end of everything but the beginning," Erpenbeck writes about Katharina. "She knows that only a very thin layer of soil is spread over the bones, the ashes of the incinerated victims, that there is no other walking, ever, for a German than over skulls, eyes, mouths, and skeletons, that each step stirs these depths, and these depths are the measure of every path, whether one wants to or not."

These are German sentences from a German writer, sensitive to what lies so close to the surface for her and her country. But Erpenbeck's novels point us beyond her nation's particular convulsions; they are about capturing what humans leave behind as other humans follow them—the ruins we must live with, even as they molder. *A*

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ESSAY

The Canadian Way of Death

The nation legalized assisted suicide—and exposed the limits of liberalism.

By David Brooks

In October of 1858, John Stuart Mill and his wife, Harriet, were traveling near Avignon, France. She developed a cough, which seemed like just a minor inconvenience, until it got worse. Soon Harriet was racked with pain, not able to sleep or even lie down. Mill frantically wrote to a doctor in Nice, begging him to come see her. Three days later her condition had worsened further, and Mill telegraphed his



ILLUSTRATIONS BY VARTIKA SHARMA

forebodings to his stepdaughter. Harriet died in their hotel room on November 3.

Mill sat alone with her body in their room for a day. He was despondent over the loss of his marriage: "For seven and a half years that blessing was mine. For seven and a half years only!"

Later that same month, he sent a manuscript to his publisher, which opened with a lavish dedication to Harriet. He subsequently wrote that she had been more than his muse; she had been his co-author. The book was, he said, "more directly and literally our joint production than anything else which bears my name, for there was not a sentence of it that was not several times gone through by us together." The book's "whole mode of thinking," he continued, "was emphatically hers."

The book was called *On Liberty*. It is one of the founding documents of our liberal world order. Individuals, the Mills argued, have the right to be the architect of their own life, to choose whom to marry, where to live, what to believe, what to say. The state has no right to impinge on a citizen's individual freedom of choice, provided that the person isn't harming anyone else.

A society organized along these lines, the Mills hoped, would produce a rich variety of creative and daring individuals. You wouldn't have to agree with my mode of life, and I wouldn't have to agree with yours, but we would give each other the space to live our fullest life. Individual autonomy and freedom of choice would be the rocks upon which we built flourishing nations.

The liberalism that the Mills championed is what we enjoy today as we walk down the street and greet a great variety of social types. It's what we enjoy when we get on the internet and throw ourselves into the messy clash of ideas. It is this liberalism that we defend when we back the Ukrainians in their fight against Russian tyranny, when we stand up to authoritarians on the right and the left, to those who would impose speech codes, ban books, and subvert elections.

After he sent in the manuscript, Mill bought a house overlooking the cemetery where Harriet was buried, filled it with furniture from the room in which she'd died, and visited every year for the rest of his life. It's a sad scene to imagine—him gazing down at her grave from the window—but the couple left us an intellectual legacy that has guided humanity another step forward in civilization's advance.

MANY GOOD IDEAS turn bad when taken to their extreme. And that's true of liberalism. The freedom of choice that liberals celebrate can be turned into a rigid free-market ideology that enables the rich to concentrate economic power while the vulnerable are abandoned. The wild and creative modes of self-expression that liberals adore can turn into a narcissistic culture in which people worship themselves and neglect their neighbors.

These versions of liberalism provoke people to become anti-liberal, to argue that liberalism itself is spiritually empty and too individualistic. They contend that it leads to social breakdown and undermines what is sacred about life. We find ourselves surrounded by such anti-liberals today.

I'd like to walk with you through one battlefield in the current crisis of liberalism, to show you how liberalism is now threatened by an extreme version of itself, and how we might recover a better, more humane liberalism—something closer to what the Mills had in mind in the first place.

In 2016, the Canadian government legalized medical assistance in dying. The program, called MAID, was founded on good Millian grounds. The Canadian Supreme Court concluded that laws preventing assisted suicide stifled individual rights. If people have the right to be the architect of their life, shouldn't they have the right to control their death? Shouldn't they have the right to spare themselves needless suffering and indignity at the end of life?

As originally conceived, the MAID program was reasonably well defined. Doctors and nurses would give lethal injections or fatal medications only to patients who met certain criteria, including all of the following: the patient had a serious illness or disability; the patient was in an "advanced state" of decline that could not be reversed; the patient was experiencing unbearable physical or mental suffering; the patient was at the point where natural death had become "reasonably foreseeable."

To critics who worried that before long, people who were depressed, stressed, or just poor and overwhelmed would also be provided assistance to die, authorities were reassuring: The new law wouldn't endanger those who are psychologically vulnerable and not near death. Citing studies from jurisdictions elsewhere in the world with similar laws, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau declared that this "simply isn't something that ends up happening."

But the program has worked out rather differently. Before long, the range of who qualifies for assisted suicide was expanded. In 2021, the criterion that natural death must be "reasonably foreseeable" was lifted. A steady stream of stories began to appear in the media, describing how the state was granting access to assisted suicide to people who arguably didn't fit the original criteria.

For example, the Associated Press reported on the case of Alan Nichols. Nichols had lost his hearing in childhood, and had suffered a stroke, but for the most part was able to live independently. In June 2019, at age 61, he was hospitalized out of concern that he might be suicidal. He urged his brother Gary to "bust him out" of the facility as soon as possible. But within a month, he applied for a physician-assisted death, citing hearing loss as his only medical condition. A nurse practitioner also described Nichols's vision loss, frailty, history of seizures, and general "failure to thrive." The hospital told the AP that his request for a lethal injection was valid, and his life was ended. "Alan was basically put to death," his brother told the AP.

In *The New Atlantis*, Alexander Raikin described the case of Rosina Kamis, who had fibromyalgia and chronic leukemia, along with other mental and physical illnesses. She presented these symptoms to the MAID assessors and her death was approved. Meanwhile, she wrote in a note evidently meant for those to whom she had granted power of attorney: "Please keep all this secret while I am still alive because … the suffering I experience is mental suffering, not physical. I think if

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If you are having thoughts of suicide, please know that you are not alone. If you're in danger of acting on suicidal thoughts, call 911. For support and resources, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 988 or text 741741 for the Crisis Text Line.

more people cared about me, I might be able to handle the suffering caused by my physical illnesses alone." She was put to death on September 26, 2021, via a lethal injection, at the age of 41.

In *The Free Press*, Rupa Subramanya reported on the case of a 23-year-old man named Kiano Vafaeian, who was depressed and unemployed, and also had diabetes and had lost vision in one eye. His death was approved and scheduled for September 22, 2022. The doctor who was to perform the procedure emailed Vafaeian clear and antiseptic instructions: "Please arrive at 8:30 am. I will ask for the nurse at 8:45 am and I will start the procedure at around 9:00 am. Procedure will be completed a few minutes after it starts." Vafaeian could bring a dog with him, as long as someone would be present to take care of it.

About two weeks before the appointment, Vafaeian's 46-year-old mother, Margaret Marsilla, telephoned the doctor who was scheduled to kill her son. She recorded the call and shared it with *The Free Press*. Posing as a woman named Joann, she told the doctor that she wanted to die by Christmas. Reciting basic MAID criteria, the doctor told her that she needed to be over 18, have an insurance card, and be experiencing "suffering that cannot be remediated or treated in some way that's acceptable to you." The doctor said he could conduct his assessment via Zoom or WhatsApp. Marsilla posted on social media about the situation. Eventually, the doctor texted Marsilla, saying that he would not follow through with her son's death.

Personally, I don't have great moral qualms about assisted suicide for people who are suffering intensely in the face of imminent death. These cases are horrible for individuals and families. What's important here is that the MAID program has spilled beyond its original bounds so quickly.

When people who were suffering applied to the MAID program and said, "I choose to die," Canadian society apparently had no shared set of morals that would justify saying no. If individual autonomy is the highest value, then when somebody comes to you and declares, "It's my body. I can do what I want with it," whether they are near death or not, painfully ill or not, doesn't really matter. Autonomy rules.

Within just a few years, the number of Canadians dying by physician-assisted suicide ballooned (the overwhelming majority of them by lethal injection). In 2021, that figure was more than 10,000, one in 30 of all Canadian deaths. The great majority of people dying this way were elderly and near death, but those who seek assisted suicide tend to get it. In 2021, only 4 percent of those who filed written applications were deemed ineligible.

If autonomy is your highest value, these trends are not tragic; they're welcome. Death is no longer the involuntary, degrading end of life; it can be a glorious act of self-expression. In late 2022, the Canadian fashion retailer La Maison Simons released a branding video that paid tribute to the assisted suicide of a 37-year-old woman afflicted with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, which affects the body's connective tissue. The video, titled "All Is Beauty," was released the day after the woman's death. In a series of lush images of her on tourist-destination beaches and at a dinner party, the video portrayed her death as "the most beautiful exit"—a sort of rich, Instagram-ready consumer experience that you might get from a five-star resort.

Within a few years, Canada went from being a country that had banned assisted suicide to being one of the loosest regimes in the world.

BACK IN 2016, critics of the MAID law saw this coming. They warned that soon enough, people in anguish and near death wouldn't be the only ones given assistance to die. That warning turned out to be understated. Within a few years, Canada went from being a country that had banned assisted suicide to being one of the loosest regimes in the world.

Some people leading pathos-filled lives have begun to see assisted suicide as a release from their misery. Michael Fraser, though not terminally ill at age 55, had become unable to walk and suffered from an array of medical problems—liver disease and incontinence, as well as mental-health issues after what he described as prolonged sexual abuse as a child. His monthly check from the Ontario Disability Support Program was barely enough to live on. "Some of the struggles he talked to me about was this feeling of not being worthy," the doctor who gave Fraser a lethal injection on July 2, 2022, told the *Toronto Star*. "There's a social aspect to poverty, a hierarchy, that affected his psyche. He told me that it did."

As assisted suicide has become an established part of Canadian society, the complex moral issues surrounding the end of life have drifted out of sight. Decisions tend to be made within a bureaucratic context, where utilitarian considerations can come to dominate the foreground. Or as the president of the Quebec College of Physicians, which regulates medical practice in the province, put it, assisted suicide "is not a political or moral or religious issue. It is a medical issue." A materialist cost-benefit analysis, for some people, crowds out affirmations that life is sacred, and socioeconomic burdens weigh heavily in the balance.

Tyler Dunlop is a physically healthy 37-year-old man who suffers from schizoaffective disorder and PTSD, and has no job or home or social contact. "When I read about medically assisted dying," he told a local news website earlier this year, "I thought, well, logistically, I really don't have a future." Knowing that "I'm not going anywhere," as he put it, he has started the process for approval under MAID. *The New Atlantis* published slides from a Canadian Association of MAID Assessors and Providers seminar, in which a retired care coordinator noted that a couple of patients

had cited poverty or housing uncertainty, rather than their medical condition, as their main reason for seeking death.

Health-care costs also sometimes come into play. According to the Associated Press, Roger Foley, a patient at a hospital in Ontario who has a degenerative brain disorder, was disturbed enough by how often the staff talked about assisted dying that he began recording their conversations. The hospital's director of ethics informed Foley that if he were to stay in the hospital, it would cost Foley "north of $1,500 a day." Foley replied that he felt he was being coerced into death. "Roger, this is not my show," the ethicist replied. "I told you my piece of this was to talk to you about if you had an interest in assisted dying." (The hospital network told *The Atlantic* that it could not comment on specific patients for privacy reasons and added that its health-care teams do not discuss assisted dying unless patients express interest in it.)

These trends have not shocked Canadian lawmakers into tightening the controls on who gets approved for MAID, or dramatically ramping up programs that would provide medical and community-based help for patients whose desperation might be addressed in other ways. On the contrary, eligibility may expand soon. On February 15, a parliamentary committee released a set of recommendations that would further broaden MAID eligibility, including to "mature minors" whose death is "reasonably foreseeable." The influential activist group Dying With Dignity Canada recommends that "mature minors" be defined as "at least 12 years of age and capable of making decisions with respect to their health." Canada is scheduled to move in 2024 to officially extend MAID eligibility to those whose only illness is a mental disorder.

The frame of debate is shifting. The core question is no longer "Should the state help those who are suffering at the end of life die?" The lines between assisted suicide for medical reasons, as defined by the original MAID criteria, and straight-up suicide are blurring. The moral quandary is essentially this: If you see someone rushing toward a bridge and planning to jump off, should you try to stop them? Or should you figure that plunging into the water is their decision to make—and give them a helpful shove?

I DON'T MEAN to pick on Canada, the land of my birth. Lord knows that, in many ways, Canada has a much healthier social and political culture—less bitter and contentious—than the United States does. I'm using the devolution of the MAID program to illustrate a key feature of modern liberalism—namely, that it comes in different flavors. The flavor that is embedded in the MAID program, and is prevalent across Western societies, is what you might call autonomy-based liberalism.

Autonomy-based liberalism starts with one core conviction: I possess myself. I am a piece of property that I own. Because I possess property rights to myself, I can dispose of my property as I see fit. My life is a project that I am creating, and nobody else has the right to tell me how to build or dispose of my one and only life.

The purpose of my life, in this version of liberalism, is to be happy—to live a life in which my pleasures, however I define them, exceed my pains. If I determine that my suffering outweighs my joys, and that things will never get better, then my life isn't working. I have a right to end it, and the state has no right to prevent me from doing so; indeed, it ought to enable my right to end my life with dignity. If you start with autonomy-based liberalism, MAID is where you wind up.

But there is another version of liberalism. Let's call this gifts-based liberalism. It starts with a different core conviction: I am a receiver of gifts. I am part of a long procession of humanity. I have received many gifts from those who came before me, including the gift of life itself. The essential activity of life is not the pursuit of individual happiness. The essential activity of life is to realize the gifts I've been given by my ancestors, and to pass them along, suitably improved, to those who will come after.

Gifts-based liberals, like autonomy-based liberals, savor individual choice—but our individual choices take place within the framework of the gifts we have received, and the responsibilities to others that those gifts entail. (This understanding of choice, I should note, steers a gifts-based liberal away from both poles in the American abortion debate, endorsing neither



VARTIKA SHARMA

a pure abortion-rights stance rooted in bodily autonomy, nor a blanket ban that ignores individual circumstances and pays no heed to a social consensus.) In our lives, we are citizens and family members, not just individuals and property owners. We have obligations to our neighbors as well as to those who will come after us. Many of those obligations turn out to be the sources of our greatest joy. A healthy society builds arrangements and passes laws that make it easier to fulfill the obligations that come



with our gifts. A diseased society passes laws that make it easier to abandon them.

I'm going to try to convince you that gifts-based liberalism is better than autonomy-based liberalism, that it rests on a more accurate set of assumptions about what human life is actually like, and that it leads to humane modes of living and healthier societies.

Let me start with four truths that gifts-based liberalism embraces and autonomy-based liberalism subverts:

You didn't create your life. From the moment of your birth, life was given to you, not earned. You came out bursting with the gift of being alive. As you aged, your community taught you to celebrate the prodigality of life—the birds in their thousands of varieties, the deliciousness of the different cheeses, the delightful miracle of each human face. Something within us makes us desperately yearn for longer life for our friends and loved ones, because life itself is an intrinsic good.

The celebration of life's sacredness is so deeply woven into our minds, and so central to our civilization, that we don't think about it much until confronted with shocking examples of when the celebration is rejected. For example, in the early 2000s, a German man named Armin Meiwes put an ad online inquiring whether anybody would like to be killed and eaten. A man came by and gave his consent. First, Meiwes cut off the man's penis, and the two men attempted to eat it together.

Then Meiwes killed and butchered him; by the time of his arrest, he had consumed more than 40 pounds of his flesh. Everything was done with the full consent of both participants, but the extreme nature of the case forced the German court system not only to sentence Meiwes to life in prison, but to face an underappreciated yet core pillar of our civilization: You don't have the right to insult life itself. You don't have the right to turn yourself or other people into objects to be carved up and consumed. Life is sacred. Humanity is a higher value than choice.

You didn't create your dignity. No insignificant person has ever been born, and no insignificant day has ever been lived. Each of us has infinite dignity, merely by being alive. We can do nothing to add to that basic dignity. Getting into Harvard doesn't make you more important than others, nor does earning billions of dollars. At the level of our intrinsic dignity, all humans are radically equal. The equal dignity of all life is, for instance, the pillar of the civil-rights movement.

Once MAID administrators began making decisions about the life or death of each applicant based on the quality of their life, they introduced a mode of thinking that suggests that some lives can be more readily extinguished than others—that some lives have more or less value than others. A human being who is enfeebled, disabled, depressed, dwindling in their capacities is not treated the same way as someone who is healthier and happier.

When such a shift occurs, human dignity is no longer regarded as an infinite gift; it is a possession that other humans can appraise, and in some cases erase. Once the equal and infinite dignity of all human life is compromised, everything is up for grabs. Suddenly debates arise over which lives are worth living. Suddenly you have a couple of doctors at the Quebec College of Physicians pushing the envelope even further, suggesting that babies with severe deformations and limited chances of survival be eligible for medically assisted death. Suddenly people who are ill or infirm are implicitly encouraged to feel guilty for wanting to live. Human dignity, once inherent in life itself, is measured by what a person can contribute, what level of happiness she is deemed capable of enjoying, how much she costs.

You don't control your mind. "From its earliest beginning," Francis Fukuyama writes, "modern liberalism was strongly associated with a distinctive cognitive mode, that of modern natural science." In liberal societies, people are supposed to collect data, weigh costs and benefits, and make decisions rationally. Autonomy-based liberalism, with its glorification of individual choice, leans heavily on this conception of human nature.

Gifts-based liberals know that no purely rational thinker has ever existed. They know that no one has ever really thought for themselves. The very language you think with was handed down as a gift from those who came before. We are each nodes in a network through which information flows and is refracted. The information that is stored in our genes comes from eons ago; the information that we call religion and civilization comes from thousands of years ago; the information that we call culture comes from distant generations; the information that we call education or family background comes from decades ago. All of it flows through us in deep rivers that are partly conscious and partly unconscious, forming our assumptions and shaping our choices in ways that we, as individuals, often can't fathom.

Suddenly people who are ill or infirm are implicitly encouraged to feel guilty for wanting to live.

Gifts-based liberals understand how interdependent human thinking is. When one kid in high school dies by suicide, that sometimes sets off a contagion, and other kids in that school take their own life. Similarly, when a nation normalizes medically assisted suicide, and makes it a more acceptable option, then more people may choose suicide. A 2022 study in the *Journal of Ethics in Mental Health* found that in four jurisdictions—Switzerland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Belgium—where assisted dying is legal, "there have been very steep rises in suicide," including both assisted and unassisted suicide. The physician who assists one person to die may be influencing not just that suicide but the suicides of people he will never see.

Gifts-based liberals understand the limitations of individual reason, and have a deep awareness of human fallibility. Gifts-based liberals treasure having so many diverse points of view, because as individuals, we are usually wrong to some degree, and often to a very large degree. We need to think together, over time, in order to stumble toward the truth. Intellectual autonomy is a dangerous exaggeration.

Gifts-based liberals understand that at many times in life, we're just not thinking straight—especially when we are sick, in pain, anxious, or depressed. My friend the *Washington Post* columnist Michael Gerson, who died of cancer last year, once said, "Depression is a malfunction of the instrument we use to determine reality." When he was depressed, lying voices took up residence there, spewing out falsehoods he could scarcely see around: *You are a burden to your friends; you have no future; no one would miss you if you died.* This is not an autonomous, rational mind. This is a mind that has gone to war with its host.

In these extreme cases, human fallibility is not just foolish; it is potentially fatal. To cope with those cases, societies in a gifts-based world erect guardrails, usually instantiated in law. In effect the community is saying: No, suicide is out of bounds. It's not for you to decide. You don't have the freedom to end your freedom. You don't have the right to make a choice you will

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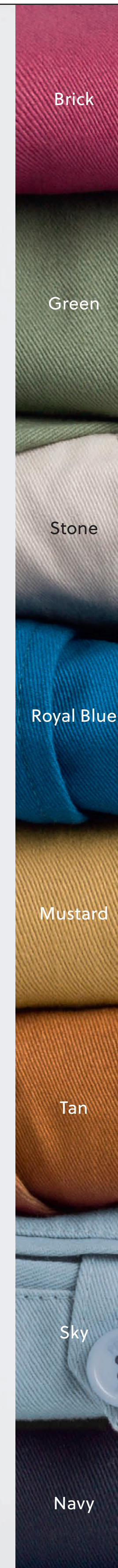
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never be able to revisit. Banish the question from your mind, because the answer is a simple no. Individual autonomy is not our ultimate value. Life and belonging are. We are responsible for one another.

You did not create your deepest bonds. Liberal institutions are healthiest when they are built on arrangements that precede choice. You didn't choose the family you were born into, the ethnic heritage you were born into, the culture you were born into, the nation you were born into. As you age, you have more choices over how you engage with these things, and many people forge chosen families to supplant their biological ones. But you never fully escape the way these unchosen bonds have formed you, and you remain defined through life by the obligations they impose upon you.

Autonomy-based liberals see society as a series of social contracts—arrangements people make for their mutual benefit. But a mother's love for her infant daughter is not a contract. Gifts-based liberals see society as resting on a bedrock of covenants. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once captured the difference this way: "A contract is a *transaction*. A covenant is a *relationship*. Or to put it slightly differently: a contract is about interests. A covenant is about identity. It is about you and me coming together to form an 'us.'"

A society constructed on gifts-based liberalism does everything it can to strengthen the bedrock layer of covenants. The MAID program, by contrast, actively subverts them. It has led a mother to plead with a doctor not to end her son's life. It has left a man enraged, feeling that he and his other family members were shut out of the process that led to the killing of his brother. The state, seeing people only as autonomous individuals, didn't adequately recognize family bonds.

Families have traditionally been built around mutual burdens. As children, we are burdens on our families; in adulthood, especially in hard times, we can be burdens on one another; and in old age we may be burdens once again. When these bonds have become attenuated or broken in Western cultures, many people re-create webs of obligation in chosen families. There, too, it is the burdening that makes the bonds secure.

I recently had a conversation with a Canadian friend who told me that he and his three siblings had not been particularly close as adults. Then their aging dad grew gravely ill. His care became a burden they all shared, and that shared burden brought them closer. Their father died but their closeness remains. Their father bestowed many gifts upon his children, but the final one was the gift of being a burden on his family.

AUTONOMY-BASED LIBERALISM imposes unrealistic expectations. Each individual is supposed to define their own values, their own choices. Each individual, in the words of Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, is left to come up with their own "concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, of the mystery of human life." If your name is Aristotle, maybe you can do that; most of us can't. Most of us are left in a moral vacuum, a world in which the meaning of life is unclear, unconnected to any moral horizon outside the self.

We now live in societies in which more and more people are deciding that death is better than life.

Autonomy-based liberalism cuts people off from all the forces that formed them, stretching back centuries, and from all the centuries stretching into the future. Autonomy-based liberalism leaves people alone. Its emphasis on individual sovereignty inevitably erodes the bonds between people. Autonomy-based liberalism induces even progressives to live out the sentence notoriously associated with Margaret Thatcher: "There is no such thing as society." Nearly 200 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville feared that this state of affairs not only makes

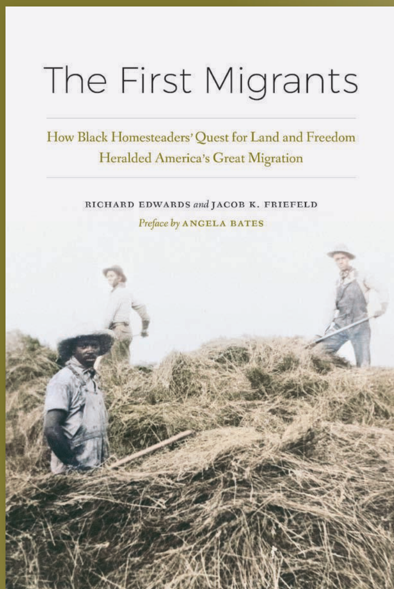
> men forget their ancestors, but also clouds their view of their descendants and isolates them from their contemporaries. Each man is forever thrown back upon himself alone and there is a danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart.

As Émile Durkheim pointed out in 1897, this is pretty much a perfect recipe for suicide. We now live in societies in which more and more people are deciding that death is better than life. In short, autonomy-based liberalism produces the kind of isolated, adrift people who are prone to suicide—and then provides them with a state-assisted solution to the problem it created in the first place.

GIFTS-BASED LIBERALISM, by contrast, gives you membership in a procession that stretches back to your ancestors. It connects you to those who migrated to this place or that, married this person or that, raised their children in this way or that. What you are is an expression of history.

This long procession, though filled with struggles and hardship, has made life sweeter for us. Human beings once lived in societies in which slavery was a foundational fact of life, beheadings and animal torture were popular entertainments, raping and pillaging were routine. But gradually, with many setbacks, we've built a culture in which people are more likely to abhor cruelty, a culture that has as an ideal the notion that all people deserve fair treatment, not just our kind of people.

This is progress. Thanks to this procession, each generation doesn't have to make the big decisions of life standing on naked ground. We have been bequeathed sets of values, institutions, cultural traditions that embody the accumulated wisdom of our kind. The purpose of life, in a gifts-based world, is to participate in this procession,



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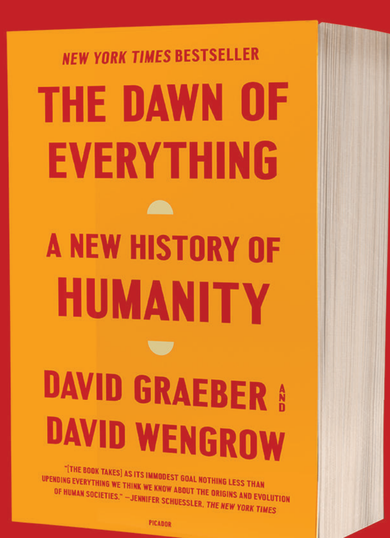
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to keep the march of progress going along its fitful course. We may give with our creativity, with our talents, with our care, but many of the gifts people transmit derive from deeper sources.

A few years ago, the historian Wilfred McClay wrote an essay about his mother, a mathematician, in *The Hedgehog Review*. One day he mentioned to her that H. L. Mencken had suffered a stroke late in life that left him unable to read or write and nearly unable to speak. His mother coolly remarked that if such a fate ever befell her, he should not prolong her life. Without a certain quality of life, she observed, there's no point in living.

A couple of years later, she suffered a near-fatal stroke that left her unable to speak. She cried the most intense sobs of grief McClay had ever heard. It might have appeared that her life was no longer worth living. But, McClay observed, "something closer to the opposite was true. An inner development took place that made her a far deeper, warmer, more affectionate, more grateful, and more generous person than I had ever known her to be."

Eventually McClay's mother moved in with his family. "It wasn't always easy, of course, and while I won't dwell on the details, I won't pretend that it wasn't a strain. But there are so many memories of those years that we treasure—above all, the day-in-and-day-out experience of my mother's unbowed spirit, which inspired and awed us all."

She and her family devised ways to communicate, through gestures, intonations, and the few words she still possessed. She could convey her emotions by clapping and through song. "Most surprisingly, my mother proved to be a superb grandmother to my two children, whom she loved without reservation, and who loved her the same way in return." McClay noted that her grandkids saw past her disability. They could not have known how they made life worth living for her, but being around her was a joy. After she died, McClay writes that "it took a long time to adjust to the silence in the house." He concluded, "Aging is not a problem to be solved, my mother taught us. It is a meaning to be lived out."

Sometimes the old and the infirm, those who have been wounded by life and whose choices have been constrained, reveal what is most important in life. Sometimes those whose choices have been limited can demonstrate that, by focusing on others and not on oneself, life is defined not by the options available to us but by the strength of our commitments.

Sometimes the old and the infirm, those who have been wounded by life and whose choices have been constrained, reveal what is most important in life.

If autonomy-based liberals believe that society works best when it opens up individual options, gifts-based liberals believe that society works best when it creates ecologies of care that help people address difficulties all along the path of life. Autonomy-based liberalism is entrenching an apparatus that ends life. Gifts-based liberalism believes in providing varieties of palliative care to those near death and buttressing doctors as they forge trusting relationships with their patients. These support structures sometimes inhibit choices by declaring certain actions beyond the pale. Doctors are there for healing, at all times and under all pressures. Patients can trust the doctor because they know the doctor serves life. Doctors can know that, exhausted and confused though they might be while attending to a patient, their default orientation will be to continue the struggle to save life and not to end life.

John Stuart and Harriet Taylor Mill believed in individual autonomy. But they also believed that a just society has a vision not only of freedom but also of goodness, of right and wrong. Humans, John Stuart Mill wrote, "are under a moral obligation to seek the improvement of our moral character." He continued, "The test of what is right in politics is not the *will* of the people, but the *good* of the people." He understood that the moral obligations we take on in life—to family, friends, and nation, to the past and the future—properly put a brake on individual freedom of action. And he believed that they point us toward the fulfillment of our nature.

The good of humanity is not some abstraction—it's grounded in the succession of intimates and institutions that we inherit, and that we reform, improve, and pass on. When a fellow member of the procession is in despair, is suffering, is thinking about ending their life, we don't provide a syringe. We say: The world has not stopped asking things of you. You still have gifts to give, merely by living among us. Your life still sends ripples outward, in ways you do and do not see. Don't go. We know you need us. We still need you.

David Brooks is a contributing writer at The Atlantic *and the author of the forthcoming book* How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen.

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ODE

to

WRITING ODES

By James Parker

This wasn't my idea.

When my *Atlantic* editors, back in the sweet, untroubled summer of 2019, took me out to lunch and suggested that I start doing something regularly on the inside back page of the magazine, I said: "Sure thing. Why don't we call it 'The Riff'? Or 'The Zoom-In'?"

I was imagining a sort of Pollocky prose explosion, a real showcase/show-off moment for me, the writer. I would riff, go cat go. Or I'd zoom in with my zany critical lens, bearing down and then expanding on some political incident or line of poetry or note from a guitar solo or …

But I wrote some Riffs, and I wrote some Zoom-Ins, and they weren't quite right. They lacked the necessary surface tension. They lacked, in some cases, a point. "How about we call them 'Odes'?" said my editor. It's nice to work with people who are cleverer than you are.

So the Odes were born. Short exercises in gratitude. Or in attention, which may in the end be the same thing. Encounters with the ineffable, encounters with the highly frigging effable. The grace of God, the piece of toast. Seeking always what my friend Carlo calls the odeness: the essence, the thing of the thing, the quality worth exploring and if possible exalting. Songs of praise, but with (I hoped) a decent amount of complaining in there: a human ratio of moans.

I went back into the tradition, too. I read the odes of Horace, good old get-on-with-it Horace: *Don't whinge, don't poke, don't pick the scab of Time. / How long we've got, the loving gods won't say* (Ode 11, Book 1, liberty-taking translation mine). I read Pablo Neruda, image extruder: He wrote hundreds of odes, to pianos, politicians, fish soup, really ranging through the randomness. He published his odes in the newspaper, insisting—wonderfully—that they appear in the news section.

The point, I discovered, is that ode-writing is a two-way street. The universe will disclose itself to you, it will give you occasions for odes, it will blaze with interest and appreciability, but you've got to be ode-ready. You've got to bring some twang, some perceptual innocence, some not-worn-out words. Respond to the essence with your essence, with the immaculate awareness that is your birthright. And on the days when the immaculate awareness is crap-encrusted, write an ode about that.

As a practice, I can tell you, it gets results. Squirrels have treated me differently since I wrote an ode to squirrels: They give me the nod, those little fiends. And I see odes everywhere now. I see them boiling up from the ground where my dog squats to do his business. I see them poking down through the clouds in fingers of divine light.

Your odes, too—can you see them? They're swimming in your ambience. They want to be written, but only by you. There's an everlasting valentine at the nucleus of creation, and it's got your name on it. *A*

James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

Athena Unbound

An excerpt from *Athena Unbound* by Peter Baldwin: a clear-eyed examination of the open access (OA) movement—past history, current conflicts, and future possibilities.

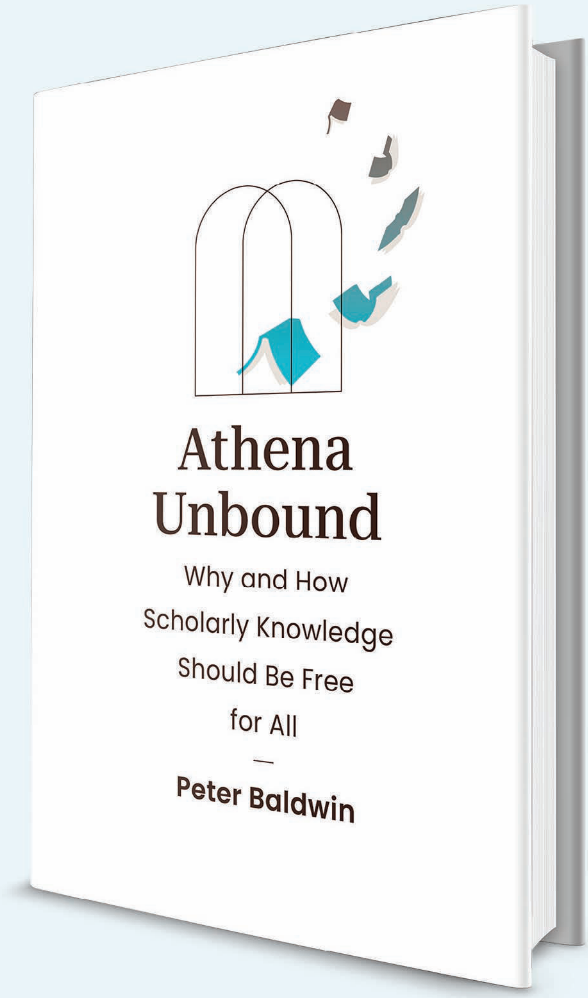
Torrents have been written about open access, but little comes from those who supply or consume knowledge: the scholars who produce the works that are to be accessible and their potential readers, whether colleagues or the general public. Instead, the drum is beaten by librarians, information- and data-science scholars, media professors, and others who populate a kind of second-order stratum of academia, scholars of scholarship.

A vast quantity of work has billowed forth, professionalizing the field by making it a full-time job just to keep up. Countless conferences, workshops, networks, study groups, Twitter feeds, journals, and blogs keep up a tireless outpouring. The caravan moves on, but where is it going? Founding and running open-access journals and publishers, organizing boycotts of the worst-offending academic presses, lobbying politicians to reform copyright laws, probing the boundaries of what counts as legal under current rules: such activities move us toward a freer exchange of information. What the theorizing and discussion contribute is less obvious. As so often in the academic world, noble intent does not necessarily produce tangible results. Process is often confused with progress.

Why, then, add another brick to the edifice? Because many participants come from a nimbus formed around the scholarly enterprise without being part of it, they often pay little attention to workaday academics' concerns. Especially in the humanities, arts, and social sciences, the professoriate is surprisingly ignorant of—and, if aware, often hostile to—open access. Because the well-funded sciences have been the first to warm to the cause, open access has been tailored to their specifications, with publishing fees paid out of generous research budgets. Including less well-endowed fields remains a hurdle.

Athena Unbound seeks to flesh out debates that often remain focused on the sciences. It situates current discussions in a long history of information's progress toward greater openness. Despite the mantra that "information wants to be free," much does not. Corporate R&D makes up the majority of research and is not striving for release. Most writers of fiction and commercially viable nonfiction sell their wares in the marketplace, hope to live from the proceeds, and have no interest in opening up. That holds for most producers of visual and aural content, too. Nor are privacy and open access harmonious bunkmates. We naturally resist freeing up information about ourselves except as we choose.

The problem of too much information is a leitmotif. Even without copyright reform or open access, as the public domain inevitably expands, freely available content will eventually dwarf what any current cohort of creators issues. What effect will this have on future cultural producers' motivations to bring forth novel work? What does the common complaint that we disgorge too much information mean? Can more information ever be a bad thing, even if some is mediocre?



Read the full OA ebook for free now.

"Offers an admirably pragmatic yet principled approach to the perennial problem of encouraging both the production and distribution of knowledge."

—**Paul Romer, Nobel Laureate and University Professor, NYU**

"Baldwin weaves, with wit and eloquence, a compelling case for making this right an online reality."

—**John Willinsky, author of *Copyright's Broken Promise***

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